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Diana Trilling

THE LIBERATED HEROINE

There is a relatively new presence on the contemporary literary scene, someone I call "the liberated heroine." In a general way, it is not difficult to define what I mean by the liberated heroine. She is a fictional creation whose first concern is the exploration and realization of female selfhood; this investigation of self undertakes to be independent of the traditional dictates of society as these pertain to female behavior and the relation of the sexes. The liberated heroine's pursuit of self-knowledge tends to be overt and even programmatic but it is not necessary that this should be so. Usually she is the spokeswoman for a female author but this too is not a necessity.

Although I speak of the liberated heroine as a relatively new figure in literature, it is important to recognize that she is not a sudden apparition in our culture. She has had noteworthy forerunners before these last ten to fifteen years and she has been in preparation—gradual, not often visible preparation—throughout the whole of literary and social history. As a matter of fact, so large a part of what I am about to say is addressed to the heroine as an historical figure that it would perhaps have been more appropriate to have described my subject as "The Evolution of the Liberated Heroine." But this would have been misleading too because it would have promised a closer historical study than is possible within the space I have here.

A general definition of what is meant by a liberated heroine is, as I say, not very difficult to settle on. It is when one tries to be more precise about the two words, "liberated" and "heroine," that the situation becomes complex, and interesting. The very concept of liberation is ambiguous since it rests on what we believe we are being liberated from and to. This was strikingly illustrated early in the current women's movement when white middle-class activists in the movement were stressing the need for women to get out of the home, while there were black working-class women for whom liberation meant the freedom to stay home and take care of their own families instead of caring for white peoples' houses and children. As I had occasion to remark in

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another context, discussing Norman Mailer's *The Prisoner of Sex*, there are probably as many definitions of female liberation as there are men or women acquainted with the phrase. And liberation not only means different things to different people, it means different things to the same person at different moments. I know of myself, for instance, that I sometimes use it to describe a condition that I favor and wish to celebrate, sometimes I use it mockingly or, worse, with a too-easy irony, and sometimes I even confuse it with its opposite, enslavement.

The word "heroine" would appear to lead a less hazardous existence. Yet here too we conspire in ambiguity. In literary discussion we use the word casually enough, and not merely in its dictionary meaning, to denote the foremost female character in a book or play, but as a value judgment: unless the chief female character in a literary work is an out and out villainess, we deal with her as its heroine. But this is the shorthand talk of the classroom and of book criticism, and in the realm of feeling it is not entirely responsible. In preparing this essay I thought back over many important women in literary history, and men as well. There are striking differences in the way men and women are depicted in literature. In the case of men there is an almost entire consonance between those who are designated as heroes and those about whom we feel that they are heroes. In antiquity, for example, there is no question but that Achilles was a hero, or Hector, or Odysseus, or Heracles. And it does not matter that we do not like Heracles—if he is not a likeable hero, he is a hero nonetheless. But what about Clytemnestra? When Aeschylus says of her that she has a "man-thinking heart," quite apart from our purely moral response to her conduct in the play our feelings about her heroine-ism have a considerable restriction put upon them. Or there is Antigone: she is out-sized, to be sure, but is she a heroine or a clinical study, an obsessive-depressive if there is such a psychiatric diagnosis? There is the scene, you will recall, where her sister Ismene asks Antigone, "Am I outside your fate?" to which Antigone replies, "Yes. For you chose to live when I chose death." This is not how a heroine talks; it is very chilling and heroines are not supposed to chill. Because of her resistance to government, Antigone is undoubtedly attractive to a modern audience; but she takes her stand against authority on her brother's behalf, not her own—by present-day standards she is too little possessed by self to be redeemed for heroine-ism even by her psychopathology and suicide.

By and large we are agreed on what a hero is: he is strong, brave, noble of purpose, noble of bearing—we remember the film critic

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Robert Warshow's famous essay about Westerns and his definition: a hero is someone who looks like a hero. We are indeed enough in accord about what a hero is to know what is meant by his opposite, the antihero, or by the character who refuses even the negative purposefulness of the antihero: the nonhero or unhero whose appearance in a present-day novel validates it as a serious work of the fictional imagination and even of the political imagination. It is the heroine who poses the questions. Is Lysistrata a heroine? Or Shakespeare's Volumnia, mother of Coriolanus? What about Emma Bovary or Jane Austen's Emma Woodhouse? Is Natasha in *War and Peace* a heroine? Is Anna Karenina a heroine? George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver? George Eliot's Dorothea Brooke? Henry James's Isabel Archer? Edith Wharton's Lily Bart? Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Ramsay? One can go on. It suggests an amusing game but I propose the questions for a serious reason, to dramatize, if I can, the degree to which our response to the heroine, unlike our response to the hero, is subjective, involved with our feelings of personal affection and identification. For me in some measure all the women I have named are heroines on the simple—no, not so simple—ground that they try to make a destiny, they wish not to be the inert recipients of their fates. Not one of them succeeds, of course: the history of heroine-ism would seem to be an endlessly reiterated story of failure. In fact, it is their failure to achieve the destinies they deserve or seek that makes most heroines of literature precious to us. It is when we see Natasha so early settled into claustral domesticity that the promise of her youth becomes most poignant for us. It is when we close the book on Emma Woodhouse's marriage that we let ourselves be fully aware of the pleasure we took in the energies that will probably no longer be exercised: the wise Mr. Knightley will curb them as unsuited to a wife, attractive as he found them before marriage. This is not how it is with heroes. They are not dependent on our affection. Of Antigone we may ask, Did Sophocles love her as one loves the true heroine of one's imagining? Of Heracles we do not ask such a question: it does not apply. Heroes need not be loved either by their authors or by us. They stand free and clear in external reality like the sculptures which so regularly memorialize their counterparts in life. Literary heroes may not always choose their destinies—the gods, the state, the thousand and one circumstances of their lives intrude upon their fates—but they are not merely acted upon by fortune; they act.

Most of the women who have come down to us in literature have been resourceful or at least competent, courageous, able to make do

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under difficulty, able to sustain suffering and deprivation, subduing their personal needs to those of others. Over all, that is, heroine-ism is a capability but it is of the negative variety. It is seldom demonstrated in action, or not in freely-elected action. Heroines are in the first instance women who please, help, and wait. They please men and are helpful to them in their undertakings. They wait for men to return from war, from crusades, from dangerous ways of earning a living, from missions in distant lands. Heroism ranges the world. Heroine-ism is fixed; characteristically it takes place at home—Penelope is an extreme instance of the female expectable. To extend the point, borrowing the language of psychology: the traditional heroine is reality-bound; her home and family are her section of reality, and she is bound to and by them. The traditional hero has the right to put himself to imaginative test, to pursue a remote goal or an abstract ideal. He does not objectify this right but experiences it as virtually a given of his biology—any intelligent woman knows that she will fail in competition with Moby Dick. It is of some consequence that the pursuit of the white whale is now claimed as a female prerogative too. Women now hunt the white whale of female selfhood as men have always sought the white whale of male selfhood. And if the search does not yet look particularly elevating, it is perhaps worth keeping it in mind that as recently as the thirties and forties our twentieth-century visionaries of the masculine—I think of Hemingway, among others—were not doing much better in pursuit of their grail than publicly counting the hair on their chests.

Except for his early Nick Adams stories, which have their roots in James Fenimore Cooper and the literature of the frontier, Hemingway's best work is set against the background of war. Heroic action has always been associated with war, which has excluded women. Of the many social changes that have contributed to the disappearance of the hero from the literature of recent decades, and his replacement with the non- or unhero of our present advanced literary culture, probably the most crucial are the closing of the frontier and the growth of antiwar sentiment. And these are central as well in the development of our fiction of female liberation. For if there are no new worlds to conquer and no battles in which to prove bravery and manliness, then bravery and manliness forfeit some of their value. Also the sexes come to be more like each other. Perhaps nowhere is the prophetic genius of Dostoievski's *Notes from Underground* better revealed than in its description of the man of action as "a limited creature" and in the assimilation to one another that the underground man makes between traits that were once thought to be particular to each sex.

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There is a passage to pause over in a recent novel called *Kinflicks*, by Lisa Alther, in which the female protagonist phones her hippie lover and is told by his father that the young man has just been hospitalized as a paranoid schizophrenic. We are not surprised because we have already seen him inching across the ground on his belly, wormlike. The speaker tells us that "every cell in her body called out in requiem [for him], her heroic nonwarrior." On one level of meaning this unhero is clearly a political statement, a protest of the military and governmental authority. But he is not that alone; he is also a statement against all masculine assertion as this has been traditionally understood. The unhero nevertheless has his unheroine mate.

And indeed this is one of the startling revelations of our current fiction of liberation, that behind the refusal of women's retrograde subjugation to male dominance there is the same old pattern of female compliance. This is how it always was in history: if men wanted their women strong, women found the requisite strength; if men wanted their women frail, women compliantly fainted. And so it appears to be still: if men cave in, women collapse in due proportion; if men want to fly, swing, or teeter precariously in emotional mid-air, women become gymnasts. To be sure, our sexual language has radically altered, as have the rules which for a long time governed female sexual deportment; but the fundamental accommodation to male preference, or to what is assumed to be male preference, still continues except in frankly lesbian fiction. Nor is there any contradiction between this attitude of female compliance and the closer approximation to each other of the sexes, to which I just referred. On the contrary. The force of women's own sexual needs, the right of women to a sexual life as full as that of men, having been so eloquently urged upon them, women now have even more need of men than they had before; and ingenious creatures that they are, they begin to contrive ways in which to make their bed partners better than a match for their own giant sexual appetites and powers. It is no longer in war that men are invited to measure their heroic capacities but in love-making—certainly it is a kamikaze enterprise in which men engage when they take on the sexual mission assigned them by an Erica Jong or a Gale Greene.

But if women's need to please men is the constant over the centuries, the form in which literature has presented us with the image of desirable femininity is, as I have indicated, anything but static or unitary. Viewed historically or even within a single cultural period the heroine is an exceedingly protean phenomenon. To the heroine of fortitude and endurance, literature has opposed the heroine of adorable

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flightiness; to the heroine of dependability, the heroine of impetuousity; to the heroine of sublimity, the earth mother; to the heroine of submissiveness, the heroine of spirit. Relative to the fictional heroine, the fictional hero is a monument to the stability of civilization. His is the virtually monolithic presence past whom society parades its variously desirable ladies.

Among heroines undoubtedly the most influential in the evolution of our present-day liberated woman has been the heroine of spirit. She is also the most treacherous of projections of a desirable female image for it is the heroine of spirit who has for so long led women to be deceived that their possibilities in life are bigger than they usually turn out to be and confirmed men in the not wholly mistaken belief that high spirit exists in a woman only to seduce them and then expire. The history of the spirited heroine is a vast and marvelous study; I am afraid I speak of it here only most inadequately, to call attention to the cruel disparity there has always been in literature, as in life, between female promise and female fulfillment. From Aristophanes to George Bernard Shaw the defeat of female spirit has given comedy some of its most bracing material and, in tragedy, underscored the idea that for something to be worth destroying it must be of special value to begin with. Obviously heroes too, and not only spirited heroines, are undone in stories and plays but there are discernible differences between how they suffer defeat. The defeated hero in literature always remains a commanding figure, deserving of our regard: Hector is a hero even in the humiliation that Achilles inflicts upon him in death. The defeated heroine is the object of our pity or of our loving ridicule. In being brought down, she is put in her place; it is a familiar place. Again, a hero is defeated not because he is heroic but despite it. Hubris may be an invitation to disaster but it is only a possible attribute of the heroic disposition, it is not identical with heroism. Female spirit in itself is the offense, often so extreme as to be punishable by death. I have been able to think of only one novel, *Wuthering Heights*, in which the death of a spirited heroine is her only conceivable consummation within the terms of the story. Much more typically the heroine of spirit is killed to placaté society: society issues the decree, the novelist is her executioner. Of Emma Bovary, Flaubert gave us the empathetic reassurance, "Madame Bovary, c'est moi"; but was her death actually the only possible outcome of her situation? Could she not have been allowed to find a rich protector or become a successful provincial cocotte? She did what she wanted to do instead of what society and her dull husband would have wished. That was her crime; it is hard to

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suppose that Flaubert would have killed off a man for such a transgression. The anti-bourgeois novelist is obedient to the bourgeois family principle of his time, that the wages of sin is death and that sexual sin is committed by women.

And even short of mortal error the fate of the spirited heroine is a sorry one. Shaw consigns Candida to her priggish husband on the sole ground that the husband needs her more than Marchbanks does—the people who for years flocked to Shaw's plays, and they were of both sexes, never saw reason to protest this. Or there is Tolstoy. Tolstoy's is of course a far greater genius than Shaw's. The dreariness in which Natasha's life ensues, or the nightmare which succeeds upon Anna Karenina's adultery, have no such Shavian taint of contrivance; on the contrary, our pain at the waste of spirit in Tolstoy's heroines only adds to our admiration for his remarkable grasp on reality. "How like life!" we think, and like life it is indeed. Nor are women authors exempt from the charge of using their spirited female characters to support the social structure as it has been generally constituted in Western civilization. Women novelists dispense female fates that are quite as harsh or grudging as those devised by male writers. From George Eliot's *Middlemarch* to so recent a novel as Francine du Plessix Gray's *Lovers and Tyrants* through countless volumes of the most uneven merit—Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*, Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Fannie Hurst's *Back Street*—the female novelist denies her spirited heroine the triumphant destiny which one might have thought was her due.

Now obviously what this leads us to is the delicate relationship that obtains, and always has obtained, between society and biology. If we can say, as of course we can, that literature both reflects and creates culture in an endlessly reciprocal process and that this process is participated in by women writers as well as by men writers, and if we can further say, as I believe we can, that literature uses the heroine of spirit as its way of testing how much change, if any, in the relation of the sexes society is able to tolerate at a given moment, then, to judge by the regularity with which female spirit is defeated in literature, I think we can conclude that, even at revolutionary moments such as our own, culture cannot tolerate very much alteration in the relation of men and women. Culture and biology are in most intimate secret connection with each other. Both of them are fundamentally endangered by female spirit. The situation is as depressingly basic as that.

Freud traced the biological motive in culture to woman's organic

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inferiority to man. The terms were invidious and he drew invidious cultural conclusions from his sound (as I think) psychobiological perception; culturally he was holding the social line as it was drawn in his middle-class Vienna. Similarly alert to biological reality but of a different cultural day than Freud's, Erik Erikson speaks of female "inner space" as the psychosexual determinant of women's special requirements in society; and surely literary history confirms the fact that in the interest of filling this inner space women as individuals, women as members of society, and women as writers were and are prepared to make much sacrifice in the realm of spirit. Indeed, even while the banner of female liberation flies high, there are those of our present-day women novelists who carry biological acquiescence to an extreme of pornographic tedium; they had their advance scout in the formidable female author of *The Story of O*, an overtly pornographic novel which ends with its heroine literally reduced to the condition of an animal led on a chain by her lover. I find this a troubling metaphor for the male-female relationship as it exists in society; it would be preferable, I think, that a separation be made between the acceptance of sexual differentiation, on the one hand, and, on the other, such personal and social abuse of irrefutable biological fact. We have been told in many literary contexts that style is morality. The style in which the defeat of female spirit is presented to us in literature is, it seems to me, in itself a form of moral decision, with large bearing on the destiny of women. Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* is a heroine of spirit, or at least she has that promise at the start of the book; her defeat is in the grand style, its inevitability faced up to by a writer of large soul and penetrating intellect. The defeat of Jo March in *Little Women* is not in the grand style; too casually accomplished, it is in the style of capitulation. The defeat of Erica Jong's surrogate in *How to Save Your Own Life* is just stylish.

I do not know if girls any longer read *Little Women*; it may be that its significant life ended with Katherine Hepburn's movie portrayal of Jo as a Bryn Mawr girl. Jo represented my own first encounter with a heroine of spirit; it was a love affair but one that ended in devastation when, at the end of the book, it was not Jo but her insipid sister Amy who got Laurie while Jo had fobbed off on her that old professor with a beard. For the reader aged nine or ten this outcome of *Little Women* established forever a fatal uncertitude about what constituted a successful femininity since it was unmistakable that Jo was the vital center of the book yet the man I wanted for her, which was also of course for myself, preferred Amy's golden curls to Jo's gallant brown head. Yet

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this is not to be laughed away as nineteenth-century folk nonsense. In our current literature of female self-realization, if a woman novelist has but one liberated life to write she will still write it as a blond or, at her most concessive, a redhead. Even George Eliot took the matter into serious account: in *Mill on the Floss* she has Maggie Tulliver say, "I'm determined to read no more books where the blond-haired women carry away all the happiness." And yet figuratively speaking—and this is the overriding sociobiological fact about our life in society—the conquering blonds still abound in Eliot's own novels. Defiant of convention as she was in her personal life, living with Lewes unmarried in Victorian London and then, at the age of sixty, marrying a man twenty years younger than herself, there was little more that Eliot could in honesty do for the spirited heroines in her novels than give them the support of her own hard-earned wisdom as they journeyed toward their inevitable frustration. As in all good writing, a second voice speaks throughout George Eliot's books. The author's commentative function is to be understood in large part as her rebuke of culture where culture, reinforced by biology, takes too easy an advantage of women of mind and spirit. For instance, in *Middlemarch* Dorothea Brooke grotesquely underestimates her own intellectual capacities and overestimates those of Casaubon whom she has decided to marry in order to help him with his literary career instead of making a career of her own, and Eliot remarks drily: "Dorothea's inferences may seem large; but really life could never have gone on at any period but for this liberal allowance of conclusions, which has facilitated marriage under the difficulties of civilization." Or in the same novel she lets Lydgate say of Dorothea in a passage whose irony is unmistakable: "Notwithstanding her undeniable beauty . . . [she] did not look at things from the proper feminine angle. The society of such women was about as relaxing as going from your work to teach the second form instead of reclining in a paradize with sweet laughs for bird-notes, and blue eyes for a heaven." Or again, Casaubon has died and Eliot has Dorothea say ruefully: "I used to despise women a little for not shaping their lives more." This confession of Dorothea's, so impressive in its spareness, represents of course George Eliot speaking for all of entrapped womankind—she was not one of those emancipated women who measures her own success by the failure of others of her sex. But perhaps most telling of all is the sorrowing comment on Dorothea's marriage: "She was always trying to be what her husband wanted, and never able to repose on his delight in what she was." Spoken in suitable accents of anger, the first half of that sentence could be a present-day summary of the liberated woman's

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most bitter feelings about women's subservience in marriage: "She was always trying to be what her husband wanted." But the sentence has its second half: ". . . and never able to repose on his delight in what she was." George Eliot is referring, we can assume, to the reassurance that she herself needed and got from Lewes; she is telling us that even female independence such as hers is finally dependent on male approval. That is rather a commanding message from the strongest-minded woman in Victorian England.

But women are dependent not on male approval alone—the word Eliot uses is "delight," male delight, and delight is an erotic word. We are usefully reminded that the creative imagination has its own biological well-springs; Eliot's is a social imagination but it is also a libidinal imagination and it frequently breaks through the constraints of culture. The strangest instance of this of which I am aware in George Eliot's own work is at the end of *Mill on the Floss* where Maggie Tulliver and her horrible brother Tom die in each other's arms. It is a scene of disquieting exaltation and we can have little doubt that Eliot means us to understand that the brother and sister are drowning in the flood of their incestuous love. But this was of course more than could be handled explicitly in 1860; we race forward to Iris Murdoch's *A Severed Head*, published in 1961, close to a hundred years later, with its entirely forthright theme of brother-sister incest. When in the early sixties Miss Murdoch's novel was successfully made into a play, the incestuous bed could be shown on the stage with, in it, in addition to the brother and sister, a second woman loved by both of them.

Although on first inspection there may seem to be little, other than that both are women of highly trained intellect, to connect Iris Murdoch with her distinguished Victorian compatriot, actually Miss Murdoch's work is a firm bridge between George Eliot's England and our own polymorphous-perverse fictional day. A hundred years apart, both novelists concern themselves with the hindrances that life in society imposes upon the development of the individual. But even more than Eliot, Iris Murdoch has in mind the male no less than the female individual. There are no heroines, fulfilled or unfulfilled, in Miss Murdoch's stories, only busy meaningless people of both sexes, the products of a busy meaningless civilization. We find no Dorothea Brooke in the novels that come with such unbroken regularity from Miss Murdoch's pen; what Miss Murdoch writes about is not the quest for female selfhood but—implicitly—the need we all have for a new way of being, a new social and moral consciousness. She is not a sexual

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liberationist; she is a nondogmatic, nonpolemical social revolutionary for whom the affectless pan-sexuality of her characters is the symbol most immediate to hand for the deformations we sustain as we perform our often highly-skilled social functions to no purpose and without satisfaction.

In a kind of conspicuous consumption of literacy there used to be an English pastime—perhaps there still is—in which one speculated on what would happen if, say, Samuel Johnson met Winston Churchill or Jane Austen, Kafka. Myself, I wonder what would have happened if George Eliot had met Colette; I like to think they would have had much warmth for each other—Colette too, after all, flouted the conventions in her private life while in her writing she located herself, like Eliot, no farther from the traditional social center than was readily permitted within the rules of her culture. According to these rules, the men Colette wrote about might be personally destroyed by love but not as a sex, only as individuals whose force of feeling, were it countenanced by society, would subvert the established order—after all, it is not socially useful for a young man to fall too much in love with his middle-aged mistress. It is women who, in transgressing social decorum, suffer as a sex. Colette is a very good writer indeed; a second voice speaks in her books too, compensating for the social submissiveness of even her autobiographical writing, wrapping a light cloak of dissent around her seeming willingness to accept social dictate. But neither this critical irony nor her sexual subject make her a writer of female liberation, as she is now often taken to be: sexuality as a general issue and female revolution as a particular one are not the same enterprise. Colette was too intelligent and realistic to suppose that life is lived, or can be lived, other than within society. The social organization was, for her, virtually a construct of nature and she was much a child of nature.

The *thereness* of the English social organization, its thick actuality as compared to the thinness of the American social texture, was of course what had drawn Henry James to make his home in England. He took with him from this country a full cast of characters for future books, and among them was Isabel Archer. Isabel Archer's story, *Portrait of a Lady*, remains, to my view, the best novel not *of* female liberation but *about* female liberation that has yet been written, indeed the only great one. That it was written by a man is striking but irrelevant here. No one has ever understood better than James did the special vulnerability of women to cultural influence. Isabel Archer's search for female fulfillment takes place in Europe but in an atmos-

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phere of exacerbated idealism which is peculiarly American. In a justly-celebrated essay, "The Heiress of All the Ages," Philip Rahv sees Isabel, like other of James's American heroines—Daisy Miller, Milly Theale, Maggie Verver—as "the character-image of aggrandizement on every level of meaning and existence . . . the prime consumer of the resources both spiritual and emotional of both the new world and the old." She represents, Rahv reminds us, America's rise as a national power in the late nineteenth century. Isabel Archer enacts her life against the background of an economic expansion that spiritually certifies itself through the moral strenuousness of art, in the exercise of taste. She is a young woman of recently-acquired independent wealth trying to discover a meaning for her life. Despite her intelligence, she is unable to find it on her own. She makes the decision—it is the same as Dorothea's in *Middlemarch*—to seek her self-realization in marriage: she will be the perfect wife of the perfect male surrogate; she chooses a gentleman of impeccable taste in art. The choice turns out to be a disastrous one; Osmond, the man she marries, is not the vehicle for aspirations such as hers. James's report of Isabel's failed effort to make the life she could make, and ought to have made, is a moving lamentation for the disappointment of female possibility—perhaps as he wrote it he was unconsciously thinking of the inability of his brilliant but neurotically tormented sister Alice to live what after her death he would call "the reciprocal life of a well person in society." Isabel Archer is a well person but she is as fearful of her own mind and sexuality as Alice was—men too can be fearful of their minds and sexuality but society gives them better compensation or cover for their impulse to deny their powers than it gives women. The book ends with Isabel's decision to stay with her husband. Male readers commonly characterize this as an heroic defeat; women readers, including myself, are more likely to read it as defeat mitigated only by dignity. And the sociobiological note is struck, although distantly: Isabel will try to realize herself in motherhood; she will bring up the illegitimate daughter of Osmond and Madame Merle, perhaps to a better outcome than her own.

Right down to our own time the actuality that James found in English society tends to persist in the fiction of that country and it gives the work of even the most self-involved novelists in Britain a substance, or at least a context, missing in our American fiction of liberation. I am not saying by this that even in Britain the struggle between female self and society has always kept society in as full view as it has the self. It has not. As a matter of fact, the heroine of

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sensibility, that tiresome twentieth-century offshoot of the heroine of spirit, was British-born, in the short stories of Katherine Mansfield. Miss Mansfield put herself to school to Chekhov but apparently on the way home lost one of the chief lessons he had to teach her, that even the short literary form provides space for a world bigger than that of the observing and recording self. In any attempt to put the novel of female liberation in historical perspective one cannot overlook the career of categorical female poeticism in this century. Sensibility—I speak of it here not as an attribute of the literary art but as its own literary mode—has an interesting history. It came into vogue at the same time as sexologies, the new marriage and sex manuals—Van der Velde's was perhaps the most widely known of them—which in the first decades of the twentieth century established the two-faced idea that women had full membership with men in the animal kingdom but that they were its more delicate and precarious inhabitants, in need of special handling. The mode of sensibility also coincided with a substantial leap forward in the development of the modern department store and of the dark arts of merchandising. "Have you that cherished look?" Bonwit Teller would soon inquire of its female customers, while writers as gifted as Elizabeth Bowen in England and Eudora Welty in this country, or as remote from each other as Anais Nin and Carson McCullers, indulged a delicacy of perception and prose not inappropriate to a sex whose preciousness had been so-to-speak medically legitimized. For reasons not too difficult to trace, this tremulous style especially established itself in our embattled South where to some extent it remains even today the favored method for writing about idiots, orphans, decayed gentlewomen, and other minority groups. Although, in England, Virginia Woolf inclined toward an excessive sensibility, she never went over that edge; perhaps it was the elitist intellectual solidarity of Bloomsbury that saved her. And the newly revived work of Jean Rhys is, I think, improperly understood if it is thought to bear poetic witness to the plight of sensitive womankind. The extraordinary novels of Jean Rhys, originally published in the late twenties and in the thirties, are far from being exercises in female literary narcissism; she deals with something much more palpable, the hard terror of psychological isolation. All of them have essentially the same chief character; in *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, which is perhaps the best of the books, this is a woman who drifts aimlessly, almost catatonically, from bar to bar in Paris, cut off from all human relationships except as she responds to the random proddings of sexual desire. She is a gentle and courteous woman, this character, even

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generous—very much like her made-in-Hollywood descendant, Charlotte Douglas in Joan Didion's *A Book of Common Prayer.* (That book, by the way, is a brilliantly gifted latter-day *Casablanca.*) But she is connected to nothing and nobody and this is not because, as would be the case in an Iris Murdoch story, she lives in a civilization that offers no anchorage but because she is herself incapable of genuine emotional connection. Today the women's movement is beginning to focus on Jean Rhys as a diagnostician of female masochism, and there is a sense in which this is not an entirely wrong reading: her lady is indeed a masochist. But to read Miss Rhys in this way is to commit her to a literary and social program that there is no reason to think is hers; it is like labelling someone a proletarian novelist because there is a working-class character in her books. Jean Rhys's dazed heroine was conceived only to serve her author's frightening vision of emotional isolateness.

More warrantedly a text of women's liberation, indeed a primary one, is of course Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook.* Yet here too there is a certain anomaly in taking as a guide to female freedom a book whose ultimate conclusion, as I read it, is that the special problem of what it means to be a woman is an insoluble one. Like Iris Murdoch, like Colette, like even Jean Rhys, the author of *The Golden Notebook* is an earth-dweller. Unlike the writers of sensibility, she does not inhabit that heavenly abode of female self-love in which one counts how many more, and more acute, nerve-ends women have than men. She does tirelessly investigate and catalog the actual social and emotional bonds that shackle women. It is testimony to Mrs. Lessing's intelligence that she nevertheless knows with D. H. Lawrence—or at least knew when she wrote *The Golden Notebook*—that all freedom sought for its own sake is a mere "rattling of chains"; as Lawrence added, "always was." It is possible, however—and this idea comes to us only as we read Mrs. Lessing's more recent novel, *Summer Before the Dark*—that in an important sense the intelligence of *The Golden Notebook* is cultural: that is, the difference between that novel, published in 1962, and *Summer Before the Dark,* published in 1973, may well be that the culture in which the earlier book was written was more intelligent about women than is our more recent culture and that, in consequence, Mrs. Lessing had a more trustworthy self-imagination available to her in the earlier work. For instance, in 1962 it is not required of Anna, Mrs. Lessing's protagonist of *The Golden Notebook,* that she regard men either as her enemy or, what eventually adds up to much the same thing, her sexual masters. Mrs. Lessing can let Anna say

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of herself "that her present raging sexual hunger was not for sex, but was fed by all the emotional hungers of her life. That when she loved again . . . [she would be a woman] whose sexuality would ebb and flow in response to his. A woman's sexuality is, so to speak, contained by a man, if he is a real man. . . ." A few years later in the history of sexual politics Mrs. Lessing would have been read out of the Party for that passage! Or again, in 1962 women had still not had their sexual anatomy so authoritatively diagrammed for them by Doctors Masters and Johnson: in *The Golden Notebook* Mrs. Lessing can write a scene in a hospital lecture room where the male lecturer starts to apply to the human female the results of his study of the sole source of orgasm in the female ostrich; fifty women doctors walk out of the room in bored impatience with such a limitation on their experience of sexual love. But by 1973 we see Mrs. Lessing yield to the dehumanizing influences of a more absolutist sexual decade; liberationist ideology has taken over from intelligence. The heroine of *Summer Before the Dark* of 1973 is a woman of middle age who, after a lifetime of devotion to a fond but unfaithful husband and to four children now grown and scattering, suddenly feels she must learn what she is other than as wife and mother—what she is as a *person*, which is to imply that personhood is what is left after wifehood and motherhood have been thoroughly expunged from us. But I do not mean to mock the life situation with which Doris Lessing faces her heroine Kate. Kate's crisis of feeling is real enough. "I look at things," Kate says, "everything, my whole life since I was a girl—and I seem to myself like a raving lunatic. Love, and duty, and being in love and not being in love, and loving, and behaving well and you should and you shouldn't and you ought and you oughtn't. It's a disease." Can anyone, reading such complaint, fail to share it? It is the common lot—our common lot in civilization, the lot of men and women both. The burdens of conformable life are very heavy for anyone of imagination. The temptation to shuck them off and run away is powerful indeed and people have been known to take considerable risk in order to be released, or try to be released, from them if only temporarily. But who is to say that it is acceptance of the conditions of life that is the disease and that the refusal of conditions is an assurance of health or even of unhealthy happiness? In Mrs. Lessing's novel, the heroine frees herself of family, home, ambition, respectability, responsibility. Kate is unfettered of even the most rudimentary desire to please. But we can see no promise of happiness for her. Vagrant, without boundaries or purchase in life, if she continues as she is going at the end of the story she can only become

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derelict or die. Does Mrs. Lessing understand this? We cannot be sure. The only evidence we have is in her title, *Summer Before the Dark*—darkness, this would appear to be telling us, will follow Kate's long summer of discontent. Mrs. Lessing does not address the outcome of her heroine's choice with the courage we had come to expect of her.

And who in our current fiction of female liberation does? The female quest is before all else the quest for freedom and in our universe of absolutes surely nothing is so absolutely absolute as the idea of freedom—who dares to speak of it as the most relative of relatives? As we know from Quentin Anderson's important study in American thought, *The Imperial Self*, ever since Emerson and Thoreau and Whitman it has been on behalf of our free life as individuals that this country has done its most ruthless colonizing, commanding for the self all things in the world, all objects and subjects, all territories and governments of feeling, and all the creations of nature. It has been by our refusal of the conditions imposed upon the individual by society that we have defined the self in what we take to be its proper state of innocence and power. Once turned outward to such specifically social issues as suffrage and property rights under law, the women's movement now turns inward to make women, too, into imperialists of the self instead of the social legislators they once were. It is a change, from outward to inward reference, well suited to a period in which external reality has small claim to grandeur, and we cannot be surprised that even Britain—the Britain of failed empire—begins to answer to the same appeal.

Yet of course so long as we physically inhabit society even if we do not admit its conditions, conditions exist. I am talking about what James called "the things we cannot possibly *not* know sooner or later." With or without their authors' consent, our novels of liberation tell us a good deal about the culture they reflect and help to create. We share this culture, so perhaps some of the circumstances reported in our liberated fiction are worth noting.

We remember that at the end of James's *Portrait of a Lady* Isabel Archer decides to stay with her husband and rear his illegitimate daughter. James give us no ground for supposing that this postponement to a next generation of his heroine's fulfillment has his encouragement; he is simply accepting the familiar "solution" of the time—things will be better for one's daughters. In our current novels of female self-realization the future promises nothing. We can no longer with confidence leave the reconstitution of life in any aspect to the unborn or newly born—if life is to be saved, it must be saved now.

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For today's heroine, liberated or not wholly so, children, far from representing a hope, would seem to be among the less rewarding of domestic duties, almost as bad as husbands. The narrator in Joan Didion's *A Book of Common Prayer* tells us of her son: "I like him but not too much any more." The intimacy of the two main female characters of Alison Lurie's *War Between the Tates* is substantially based upon their shared distaste for their own and each other's offspring. Kate Alexander, Gale Greene's other self in *Blue Skies, No Candy* has an eighteen-year-old daughter hidden away somewhere in a commune—I had almost said "convent" because it provides a similar refuge for the unwanted. Ginny, Lisa Alther's protagonist in *Kinflicks*, gives up her little girl rather than let the child interfere with her search for her own female identity. And, as I indicated, such scattering of her children as they don't accomplish for themselves in the normal process of growth the heroine of Doris Lessing's *Summer Before the Dark* would eagerly accomplish for them. The spokeswoman in this later novel of Mrs. Lessing's is forty-five. The median age of most liberated heroines is forty. (Erica Jong in *How to Save Your Own Life* is thirty-two and childless.) I should make it plain, however, that the disaffection from children is not accompanied in these novels by any easy acceptance of abortion as a way out of unwanted pregnancy. Indeed, the disfavor in which abortion is held by our liberated writers is one of the important continuities from an earlier phase of female self-awareness. Ever since it became mentionable in literature, abortion has been used as a fictional symbol—I think a fitting one—of deep emotional injury to a woman, a violation of the integrity of her body. In *The Battle Between the Tates* the silly graduate student who has broken up the Tates's marriage suddenly achieves stature in the story by her busy little determination to have her baby even though there won't be a father to help in its upbringing. And in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, what the heroine surfaces from is apparently the bad aftermath of an abortion, but I say "apparently" because in her extended episode of mental derangement I was not quite clear whether she was thinking of herself as the baby she had lost or as a small furry animal.

The disposition to mental disturbance among liberated heroines, their capacity for friendship with other women, the economics of programmatic female freedom, the relation of these heroines to the world of fashion and cosmetics: these expectably vary from story to story but not without leaving some trail for anyone bent upon generalization. Madness, for instance—and this is in a day when our

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advanced literature presents madness not only as a metaphor for a despised civilization or a figurative path of escape from a despised society but as an actual new Jerusalem in which we should try to gain citizenship—madness hovers only in the wings of liberated fiction; it rarely takes the center of the stage. But I do not think we are meant to conclude from this that the liberated heroine brings to her efforts of self-realization an invincible mental steadiness; at most what seems to be suggested is that the achievement of selfhood functions as a helpful principle in the design of a sound life. In the fiction I have canvassed, both English and American, there are few heroines who have not been in one or another kind of psychiatric treatment. In addition—what is a bit unnerving—they put a considerable therapeutic reliance on their dreams from which they take literal direction; from *The Golden Notebook* onward, in fact, our liberated heroines tend to be ancient mariners of their sleeping lives, sparing the reader no detail of their night consciousness. It could be that in today's social life the telling of one's dreams is fast becoming a substitute for showing people one's travel photographs.

Then there is the matter of friendship. Of course friendship between women has never had a good name. Now there is the possibility that, having flushed out the shared enemy, men, women may be more trusting of each other. But their literature has not yet, to my knowledge, put this to much test. What has been produced is a sort of sacred fount situation: where there is more woman-with-woman relationship, at least in the form of ritualistic "sisterhood," there is apparently less man-woman friendship—unless, that is, the man has placed himself outside woman's sexual orbit. But, as I say, there is contradiction here too: for instance, in *Lovers and Tyrants* Francine Gray proposes friendship between men and women either free of erotic charge or laced with not very attractively presented perversity.

As to what the liberated heroine feels about money, when this fiction is not being a women's magazine field-day of consumerism it reads like Karl Marx's roster of the decadent hangers-on of revolution. Obviously, the more money, the more privilege of class—and this is also to say, the more sex. It is a time-consuming occupation that some of these women engage in, allowing for little other gainful employment. Too, the upkeep on a dedicated life of sexual completeness is bound to strain any but the solidest bank account—in addition to the more familiar routines of the beauty parlor, there are exercise classes, unlimited long-distance telephone calls to absent lovers, unimpeded transatlantic and transcontinental flights with or to new partners,

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quantities of Vuiton luggage, confidence-raising personal secretaries, and silicone injections, not to mention a variety of French omelette pans geared to the size of the entertainment. But even the less well-fixed heroine lives in unspecified solvency: money is never a problem, let alone *the* problem. While the enterprise of female self-discovery may not be solely a middle-bracket phenomenon, the imagination of selfhood and of freedom in these novels is an imagination of selfhood and freedom as adumbrations of middle-class status and security. And education is similarly status-linked. The talk, when it is not of sex and self, is of Descartes and genetics, of anthropology and archeology. But why not? If Pynchon can go on as he does with the postal system of Thurm and Taxis and with his in-jokes about Jacobean drama, surely women have the right to ask equal time for their displays of learning.

And finally there is the sexual experience itself and what it reveals or suggests about the nature of contemporary culture. Although sexual desire and potency, both in men and in women, were subjects explicitly dealt with in medieval and Renaissance writing, usually with special emphasis on the ferocity of female sexual desire, the moral design of bourgeois life as it took shape after the seventeenth century no longer permitted this image of women. Women changed from being an asset to being a property, and it was in men, the proprietors, that sexual power and need came to be exclusively vested. I alluded earlier to the sexologies that appeared in the early years of this century, restoring women to their full but now cautiously supervised place in the animal kingdom. These manuals parallel in the sphere of sex the many other efforts of social renovation which were formulated in Victorian thought. There had developed a sharp division between bad women and good, prostitutes and wives, which failed to comport with the egalitarian emotions which had begun to mobilize themselves against the social injustices of the entrenched bourgeois order. If for no other reason than that this rift encouraged the sexual exploitation of the poor, it had to be healed. Even at the risk of an extreme of historical over-simplification, I think that our women's movement of the sixties and the seventies must be viewed as yet another step in the egalitarian process initiated a century ago. And if what started as social reformism has now become a revolution whose suitable slogan could be "Expropriate the expropriators," well, that's what happens when push comes to shove.

But the unhappy fact is that like other kinds of revolution, sexual revolution also has its Thermidor: one is liberated to a new tyranny. Certainly it is difficult to find the sexual analog to democracy or even

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to the forty-hour work week in the situation of our new heroines of freedom. The sexual daring, appetite and responsiveness now advertised in fictions by women about women is epic. Except in pornography surely one has never met sexual activity in such quantity. Should there be no man immediately available, another woman must be at once provided, or some mechanical instrument of gratification—vibrators are endemic. Indeed in *Kinflicks* the vibrator precipitates one of the few truly funny scenes of liberated fiction—it is not a literature notable for its humor—when a young woman who has given up on both men and women as lovers deserts a lesbian party in a Vermont female commune for her usual solitary victory of selfhood; but the wiring in the farmhouse is faulty, she blows a fuse, and the house and its revellers are plunged into blackness from which they can be rescued only by the local fire company—the understanding of what is going on in this house and what caused the blackout dawns on these Vermont volunteers only slowly. So arduous is the heterosexual ardor of liberated heroines that they must have recourse to soothing baths in baking soda, so monumental their responsiveness that it is to be measured not by the shaking of the earth but by the crash of planets. In point of chic, the multiple female orgasm has somewhat the same place in present-day liberated fiction that casserole cookery had in Mary McCarthy's *The Group*. Whether men are flattered by the invitation that is being extended to them or frightened out of their wits, I have no way of knowing. It does seem proper, however, to stress the observation that only hard-core pornographers of the sado-masochistic variety, but no serious male authors with whose work one is acquainted, not even Henry Miller, have treated women as much like sex objects as women writers now treat themselves.

And no more than I can speak with any certainty about the effect this liberated fiction has on male readers can I speak with certainty of its effect upon women readers throughout the population, except to propose the possibility that it may not be entirely comforting. There would seem to be a widespread belief that ours is an age of universal sexual enlightenment. It is not a belief to which I subscribe; in my experience what an age is supposed to think or feel and what actual people think and feel are not always the same thing. No doubt there has been progress in our century in the dispelling of sexual superstition and fear. But in sexual matters, however earnestly we undertake to educate people, it is surely easier to scare and confuse than it is to instruct—our sexual emotions inhabit dark areas of the consciousness fed by uncharted streams. Then too, how reliable is the teaching? How

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secure are we that these sexual best-sellers and also the films which will take license from them are not contributing to a mythology as retrograde to truth as any of which they presume to be ridding us? Ours is a technological world. We want the best industrial and social technology, the best psychological technology, the best erotic technology. Few of us can maintain faith in our own instincts or even in what we might like to call knowledge in the face of a literature intent on telling us that we've been living so far below our productive potential. To separate the specifically erotic pedagogy of these novels, so much of it of questionable worth, from the usefulness these books may nevertheless have in the liberation of female spirit is a daunting project, for it demands not only an awareness of the centuries-old defeat of female spirit, which we try to redress overnight—it is too much to ask of ourselves—but also a complex understanding of the female dilemma as not just female but human. It requires that, on the one hand, we recognize that women have quite the same right as men have to be messy, trivial and self-deceiving, and, on the other hand, that messiness, triviality and a false rhetoric of the emotions dehumanize women no less than they do men.

It is not at all my sense of our current fiction of liberation that it means to have a dehumanizing influence, or even a desocializing one. That is not its platform. Its intention is plainly what we have come to regard as "progressive." This is so, I think, even in the case of the more sensational of current liberationist novels; indeed, if we describe sensationalism as the wish to excite, and if, in a culture which has been demonstrably hypocritical about sex, we look upon all sexual overtness as a brief for truth, then our fiction of sexual excitation becomes by definition a force for social betterment. But we do not yet know how things will work out; we cannot yet know because the evidence is not in, and in the meanwhile I find myself not at all certain that in the name of a life truer to ourselves we are not acceding in rather frightening new suggestions for what it is that enhances the human personality. In fact, three scenes from these books I have been reading—they are three among many examples—haunt me for what they may propose of our fate as people of feeling.

The first is in Doris Lessing's *Summer Before the Dark*. Kate, the middle-aged heroine who is running away from the entrapments of her traditional female life, has just rented a room from an unknown young woman named Maureen and is taking possession of her new quarters. Maureen comes into Kate's room, looks at herself in the mirror in which Kate is also looking, does a circling flinging dance, then sticks

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out her tongue at Kate and at herself in the glass and goes from the room. Of this encounter Mrs. Lessing writes: "Kate felt assaulted. . . . She felt it as an aggression, and this was because, quite simply, of the marvelous assurance of the girl's youth. Of her courage in doing what she felt like doing. Yes, that was it, that was what she, Kate, had lost."

The second is not so much a single scene as the substantial last section of Francine Gray's *Lovers and Tyrants* in which Stephanie, the author's spokeswoman, drives across the country with a homosexual friend whom she deeply loves as he does her. This homosexual, whose name is Elijah, is pictured not as a grown man whose sexual preference happens to be for other men but as a petulant spoiled child, wholly without pride, who divides his time between lying with his head in Stephanie's lap while she tells him stories and ripping off every bar or coffee shop at which they stop. Every night of their journey Stephanie and Elijah sleep in the same bed, spoon-like; eventually there are the nights when Elijah triumphantly overcomes the barrier of his homosexual disposition. For some reason unexplained by the author, these consummations, one shared, the other unshared, have the effect of victoriously completing Stephanie's quest for freedom: by giving herself totally to Elijah's infantile needs, she has not only experienced an extreme of sexual ecstasy; she has now become a "self."

The last scene is from *Kinflicks* by Lisa Alther. Ginny, Miss Alther's heroine, has left her husband and baby, and she has come home on a visit to her sick mother. The mother is in the hospital; she is slowly dying. Most of the time she is too weak to talk, often too weak even to keep her eyes open. Of the mother's silence and closed eyes as she sinks toward death, Miss Alther has her spokeswoman reflect that "she had had to dismiss Ginny for the sake of her own development."

Manifestly these are scenes conceived in desperation by writers who would appear to be incapable of distinguishing between that which is life-giving and that which is not, or even, as in Miss Alther's case, between actual life and death. Our literary culture has of course sufficiently schooled us in the understanding of how our authors have reached this state of desperation. What it has failed to tell us is where they stop reflecting a deeply troubled society and where they begin their own job of adding to the dismays of the world we live in. This is a bothersome question, however, and perhaps it is best avoided by pressing upon ourselves the reminder that art is, and always has been, a mysterious process whose support of life is finally not easy to perceive or foretell.

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Melvin M. Tumin

WHAT IS ART? AN INTERVIEW WITH HAROLD ROSENBERG

This interview by Melvin Tumin with Harold Rosenberg was completed a few months before Harold Rosenberg's death in Aug., 1978.

Tumin: You've written so much about art that I think if I start you on your most recent work, we may pick up the main issues right from the beginning. So I want to turn to your article on Jasper Johns in the last issue of *The New Yorker* (December 26, 1977). You start with a quote from Baudelaire, who says, "What is pure art according to the modern idea? It is the creation of an evocative magic, containing at once the object and the subject, the world external to the artist and the artist himself." I take it you quote that approvingly?

Rosenberg: I do, especially in regard to Jasper Johns. The problem was Johns' affirmation of the idea of a work of art which would in no way include the personality or the temperament or any other individual aspect of the artist. That is, he was speaking of a completely objective or impersonal art. This is a basic misapprehension. So the quotation from Baudelaire which stresses the dual aspects of a work of art, so as to reflect both the personality of the artist and the objective world, seemed appropriate.

Tumin: That comes as close to your saying what a work of art is as I've ever heard you say.

Rosenberg: It doesn't say what a work of art is.

Tumin: Well, Baudelaire asks, "What is pure art?"

Rosenberg: Well, that doesn't interest me. I'm not interested in pure art. There is no such thing. If Baudelaire wanted to use the term, that's all right with me. I think he meant, What are the requirements in the psychological or, if you wish, the spiritual sense, of a work of art? Or the metaphysical sense? The artist, insofar as he creates a valid work of art, has a magical apprehension of both the objective external world and of himself.

Tumin: He has a magical apprehension of himself, as well as of the world?

Rosenberg: Of both. At the same time.

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Tumin: He treats himself as object, as well as the external world?

Rosenberg: Well no. Stick to the quotation.

Tumin: It says, "It is the creation of an evocative magic by the artist."

Rosenberg: That's right.

Tumin: "Containing both the object and the subject, the world external to the artist and the artist himself."

Rosenberg: That's right. So the work contains both the external world and the artist himself.

Tumin: That's obviously not a sufficient definition of a work of art.

Rosenberg: It's not a sufficient definition or a definition at all. It's a condition for an acceptable work of art. It could be, you might say, the definition of a perfect work of art. You could regard this magic as totally unattainable, that is, in the Hegelian sense of the subject of the object. But I agree with Baudelaire that the necessary aim of art is to attempt to see the external world and formulate the subjective experience of the artist at the same time. This is a very important emphasis in art today because of the history of art in America in the last fifteen years. There's been a very great thrust toward one form or another of objectivity, that is, the attempt to eliminate the feelings or subjective impact of the artist. The artist has tried to present himself as much as he could as a figure that you might find in technology or in science. The relationship between technology and art has encouraged the kind of artist who regards himself as a kind of technician or maker of art.

Tumin: Why was that impulse so strong? What was it a reaction against? Was it a reaction against a previous kind of subjectivism?

Rosenberg: In terms of statements that were made, it was a reaction against Abstract Expressionism—a series of reactions. Among the first were artists such as Jasper Johns, who said, "I don't want to express myself on the canvas, and I'm not trying to evoke on the canvas a mysterious sign. I'm prepared to paint things that everybody knows." Or, as he put it, "*already* knows." And then he produced his paintings of the American flag, and targets, and of numbers, and of letters of the alphabet, saying, "Here is something that has nothing to do with me. I didn't invent the American flag and I didn't invent the numbers."

Tumin: You're being very lucidly descriptive of what he does. But I'm trying to press you to say why you think he reacts that way against Abstract Expressionism. What is it that's unsatisfactory about Abstract Expressionism?

Rosenberg: Now, that's a big subject. There are many different reasons

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that artists found for reacting against Abstract Expressionism. One of the basic reasons, it seems to me, was that Abstract Expressionist art implied that the artist was in a continous state of striving, of attempting to arrive at some kind of vision, and this is very uncomfortable. Before Johns ever appeared on the scene I heard expressions of antagonism on the part of young artists toward, for example, the *angst* of Bill de Kooning. They said, I don't want to spend the rest of my life struggling with art. You know, Bill had said that if he could, he'd spend the rest of his life painting one picture, having in mind the Balzac story of "The Unknown Masterpiece," in which the artist spends his life struggling to realize a single picture. The young artists didn't want that. They wanted to have a career as artists and paint pictures and sell them.

Tumin: Are you calling them artists by courtesy?

Rosenberg: No, I think they were expressing what are generally regarded as the normal desires of artists. There was something extreme about the Abstract Expressionists. They seemed to lead extreme lives, like Jackson Pollock, or Franz Kline, or Rothko. Somebody has been making the point constantly in the last twenty years that these artists tended to die young, despite the fact that de Kooning is now seventy-four, and Hans Hofmann died at eighty-six. Still there are many examples. There's Kline, there's Tomlin. There's Rothko who committed suicide; there's Jackson Pollock killed in an automobile accident; there's Gorky committing suicide, even though he wasn't exactly an Abstract Expressionist. But the idea is that this was dangerous art. And the fact is that this was dangerous art, that is, the artists were involved in an attempt to change something basic in their lives.

Tumin: Are you saying that this is dangerous art, rather than art being dangerous? Or would you argue that art *per se* is dangerous?

Rosenberg: You can do whatever you want with art. You can turn it into a commonplace craft. You can turn it into a way of flattering the rich, as in the great days of portraiture. You can paint people's houses and their estates and make them look beautiful.

Tumin: But now it seems to me you're getting back to an absolutely minimalist definition of art, one which makes it wholly indiscriminate in terms of what it commands, in terms of any special qualities. Because if it's a something, which we have yet to say what it is, which lends itself so well to so many purposes, what is the "it?"

Rosenberg: You can't say that there is the it.

Tumin: You said art can lend itself to painting houses.

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Rosenberg: It can lend itself to anything.

Tumin: Then what is the "it" that lends itself?

Rosenberg: That's very simple. There is a human activity that has been going on traditionally for 30,000 years, and that activity is therefore well known to human beings, and they call it art.

Tumin: What characterizes that activity and distinguishes it from other activities?

Rosenberg: Well, for one thing, as they used to say about the herring, you hang it on the wall.

Tumin: Yeah, but we know that the herring is not green and doesn't whistle.

Rosenberg: That is very often true about paintings, too. But it doesn't prevent them from hanging on the wall, any more than the herring. That is, you can hang any picture on the wall. You can also have social acceptance of certain kinds of images as the only kinds of paintings that are worthwhile, as in the Soviet Union, where they carry certain messages.

Tumin: But now you've taken us very far from the Baudelaire statement of the conditions of art. Granted they're not sufficient conditions. Still, they are far more discriminating and restrictive than what you're now allowing art to be.

Rosenberg: Don't forget that he said pure art.

Tumin: Well, let's leave pure art . . .

Rosenberg: Well, wait a minute. The reason why I returned to the word pure is that he thereby implied that only a certain kind of art achieved those conditions. He put in the word pure. I wouldn't use that word. You could substitute the word authentic, if you like, or anything else. But the point of the matter is he leaves room with that adjective for all kinds of other art in which those conditions are not met. It's obvious, then, if anybody knows anything about the history of art, that a great deal of art was made in shops with shop techniques. In eighteenth century France there was an enormous production of sculpture for estates.

Tumin: For you, then, the word art does not necessarily connote anything about excellence or value or worth. You're saying that it is an activity in which all kinds of people at all levels of skill or non-skill can participate for all kinds of purposes. However ugly or foul the purposes may be, something called art may serve all those purposes or may be used for all that.

Rosenberg: Yes, I think that's correct. Because otherwise you get in a position where the definition would include its own valuation. That

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is, if you cut out all those "bad" types of art, then the word "art" would necessarily mean marvelous art. In fact, it would be very hard to think of there being a work of art at all, it would be so perfect. The existence of art depends on adjectives.

Tumin: Then you're willing to make the term art almost wholly non-restrictive to start with.

Rosenberg: Yes.

Tumin: And then to discriminate and distinguish various qualities, dimensions, characteristics, objects, uses, skills, qualities of art?

Rosenberg: Yes.

Tumin: So we don't need to worry about what me mean by the generic term art. It's some kind of activity which involves chalk or paint or movement or music or sound or whatever?

Rosenberg: That's right. In practical terms, the definition of art—when I say practical terms, I mean not theoretical terms—the definition of art has very often been encouraged by concepts of good art, and therefore the attempt was made to exclude all other kinds of art.

Tumin: You want to make art a generic human activity, which is to be distinguished, perhaps, from science, from automobile driving, from gymnastics?

Rosenberg: Right.

Tumin: That means, now, that it makes sense to say that, given this generic human activity, as in all other human activities, there are levels of excellence, high and low qualities of things.

Rosenberg: I want to just get away from excellence itself, because the concept of excellence in art has an almost political meaning. When you talk about excellence you imply that a basic measure in art is purely qualitative, and I don't accept that, because a work of art can be less excellent than another work of art, if you're applying standard A, and, let's say, much more interesting intellectually and much more stimulating emotionally or imaginatively and therefore much more valuable. The concept of excellence taken by itself is an academic idea.

Tumin: So we want to talk about the different aspects or dimensions of art which loosely one might say that, if they reached a certain level, you would say that's an excellent level, as against a mediocre level on that dimension, without now talking about the overall excellence.

Rosenberg: Overall excellence is an academic term. As I say, it's a very impressive one, and it's being used rather aggressively today.

Tumin: You don't object to aggressive criticism and analysis, do you?

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Rosenberg: Well, I'm making an aggressive criticism of this aggressive term.

Tumin: Let's see if we can go after some of the dimensions that you think are important. Let me tell you why I ask this. For better or for worse, people read you very carefully. Lots of people read you, maybe not as carefully as you'd like, but they read you. For better or for worse, you're said to be a very influential person in the world of art. This means that in some sense people are saying that Harold Rosenberg is the kind of person who, if you follow him, he can tell you the difference between a good work of art and a bad work of art. You chronically abstain from ever being willing to assume that posture publicly, although you've been willing to comment about all kinds of things about particular art works. But let's now talk about some of the things that you look for when you're estimating a work of art. One which you mentioned in an unguarded moment was the importance of the idea that the artist is confronting or the problem he is trying to solve. Is that a fair phrasing?

Rosenberg: It's perfectly all right. What you have in mind is the aim or intention of the artist. But I don't like the word problem. That's another loaded word because I know that artists have problems. I know that they struggle with various problems. But I don't believe an artist as artist tries to resolve problems. I'm inclined to agree with Picasso when he says he finds, he doesn't seek. There's been a terrible development, as a result of university art education in the last twenty years, in which art has been presented as a problem-solving activity, and believe me some of the problems that have been trumped up we could have very well done without. They're not really problems for artists. They're problems for people who are in universities.

Tumin: Then what do you mean when you say one of the criteria you look for when you're looking at a work of art is the idea that the artist has, what he's trying to do, and one of the dimensions of that idea is how important it is?

Rosenberg: That's right.

Tumin: What do you mean by an important idea? Is it always relevant to the history of previous ideas in the world of art?

Rosenberg: The phrases that you add are helpful, at least in the approach I'd like to take. The history of art, especially in the last couple of hundred years, has touched on almost every conceivable form of thought, on physics, on social problems, on psychological problems and all kinds of things regarded as intellectual activities. Now, some of these problems, or areas of thinking and imagination,

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are basic to human life. Some of them are much less so. For example, it's very important to consider the effects of blue in juxtaposition with red.

Tumin: Important for whom?

Rosenberg: Well, it's important in general. I mean it's a form of knowledge to understand the optical effects of color.

Tumin: Most people in the world could live the rest of their lives without knowing.

Rosenberg: That's right. But this is still an important question. That is, optical phenomena are important. A science is devoted to them, and many things have been made and developed as a result of this interest. However, I don't regard it as the most important thing in human life.

Tumin: Is the question of categorical imperatives, which comes out of major metaphysical concerns and philosophical problems, a more important problem?

Rosenberg: Certainly.

Tumin: When you choose the problem of the juxtaposition of blue vs. green, you're choosing a problem which is immediately relevant to the visual arts in some sense. Right?

Rosenberg: That's right. They're relevant to the visual arts and to some people they are the field, or area in which the visual arts can make their maximum contribution. I'm about to disagree with that. While it's true that color is a specialization of painting, it's not the greatest thing that painting has ever dealt with.

Tumin: What are some of the great things painting has dealt with, the truly great things? God's grace?

Rosenberg: God? Yes, traditionally painting has dealt with religious or metaphysical questions. Since these questions are central to all cultures in the past and in the present, too, although they are less visibly central in the present, these metaphysical questions can be said to be the most important questions that art has dealt with. Therefore, to deal with art as if it were exclusively related to color is a reduction of the stature of art. Let me give you an apt example of the answer to this question. If you compare the aims of Barnett Newman and the aims of Josef Albers, the first is involved with the question of the absolute in relation to man, and the second is involved with color relations. This is very clear.

Tumin: So one is more important than the other for art, all other things being equal.

Rosenberg: All other things can't be equal.

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Tumin: I knew I would get that. That is, all technique being equal.

Rosenberg: They're both very good painters.

Tumin: They're both very good painters, but let's say, if you can imagine for a moment all other things being equal, but one painted the best he could paint about the meaning of color and the other painted with an equally good quality about the meaning of absolute *angst,* would you now say that the latter was a better painter because the idea was more important?

Rosenberg: But I wouldn't care whether he was a better painter, because you've established that as painters they are equal. What I would say is that I would be much more interested in the paintings of the one than I would in the paintings of the other.

Tumin: I don't want your interests. Would you say that one is more important? Is one more important for art than the other?

Rosenberg: I would say so, yes. I would be inclined to agree with Newman, by the way, who said this, that the subject matter of the artist is the most important thing to consider about his work. And if the subject matter could be conceived as having a relation to the experience of the absolute, I would regard that as more important than, shall we say, insights into the relations of blue and pink.

Tumin: Can we then have a great painting about a trivial subject?

Rosenberg: Well, that's where you run into difficulties of definition. If it's a great painting, it can't be about a trivial subject. Therefore, if a subject seems to be trivial, that is, for example, a bowl of apples, what is important about a bowl of apples?

Tumin: The great Cézanne . . .

Rosenberg: Exactly. That's not just a bowl of apples. There's something else going on there. I think Meyer Schapiro made the distinction between subject matter and object matter. The object matter there is apples, but the subject matter is something else.

Tumin: In the case, say, of Cézanne's apples, what's the subject matter as against the object matter?

Rosenberg: Well, as I say, the object matter would just be apples. But the subject matter as far as Meyer, for example, is concerned is infinite. Did you read his article on the apples of Cézanne?[1] He carries these apples off into the tradition of apples in art, which is a great tradition. You know, the apples of the Greek goddesses, and the Hesperides, and all kinds of associations with apples, and of course Meyer is in this piece something of a Freudian and talking about virility and various other connotations of apples. So the subject

[1] Schapiro, Meyer, "The Apples of Cézanne", *Art News Annual,* vol. 34 (1968), pp. 34–53.

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matter there becomes very extensive. Those apples are not just hanging around for somebody to have a piece of fruit.

Tumin: So it is not possible to say beforehand that any given subject matter is trivial or important, right?

Rosenberg: I wouldn't put it that way because maybe it is possible to say beforehand that certain . . .

Tumin: Apples are *per se* trivial, right?

Rosenberg: Well, they are trivial perhaps as fruits, but not *per se.* You're twisting language here.

Tumin: No, I'm saying fruits *per se* are trivial.

Rosenberg: How can you say fruits are trivial?

Tumin: Fruits, as against eternal salvation.

Rosenberg: Fruit is a part of the eternal salvation. After all, we're all here on account of an apple. You know perfectly well that if Adam had not eaten that apple we would all be immortal, we would be leaping around in paradise, so an apple cannot be regarded as, *per se,* trivial.

Tumin: Let's go back to your original distinction in which you said it's quite clear that Barnett Newman's ideas are more important for painting to deal with than Albers' problems, since Albers was concerned primarily with color problems and Newman was concerned more, let's say, with metaphysical and philosophical problems. Now what you're saying is that, on some scale of importance that you can state beforehand, problems of color are less important than problems of philosophy.

Rosenberg: Of human existence, yes. I could say that in general, yes. When Meyer wrote his article about the apples of Cézanne, which is not so long ago, it was maybe five years, he was attacked violently by people who felt he was demeaning the art of Cézanne with all this content or context-matter that he attributed to his reading of apples. In other words, there is a very definite vein of thought that holds that art should not be interpreted in terms of content. This has been the biggest fight in the last twenty years in art criticism. It's the same thing, of course, that took place in literature before. The same criticisms have been leveled at Leo Steinberg who makes Freudian, neo-Freudian interpretations of paintings. And some people object very strenuously to this attribution of meanings to paintings.

Tumin: Do you?

Rosenberg: No, I don't agree with either Steinberg or Schapiro about their particular analyses, but I don't see anything objectionable in their finding rich depths in paintings.

Tumin: What do you mean, you don't agree with them?

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Rosenberg: Well, I don't follow the Freudian mode of thinking to the degree that they do.

Tumin: But you don't like that attributional system or the Marxian attributional system, and you don't like the details of the method that those require.

Rosenberg: Yes, but I have no objection to anybody who finds them suggestive using them. I think they're all part of criticism, and I think they're legitimate. In other words, I think that Meyer's analysis of Cézanne and Leo's analysis of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* are perfectly legitimate ways of looking at paintings.

Tumin: What do you mean by legitimate ways of looking at them?

Rosenberg: A spectator of a painting has the right to discover in it whatever meanings he discovers in it.

Tumin: Now that's reducing that to nothing. You're simply saying that in a democratic society everybody has a right to find what he wants to find.

Rosenberg: No, that's not the point. The approach which enriches the meanings of a work of art has value. I think a painting, after all, consists of the aura of interpretations which has collected itself around it over the years and these interpretations add to that aura. It's true that every once in a while people will be stimulated to clean the paintings again of these auras, the same way that you get rid of a lot of varnish, but that doesn't necessarily produce a better interpretation.

Tumin: But some of those auras can hurt a painting, can they not? Suppose an aura is wholly misguided?

Rosenberg: Well, they all tend to be wholly misguided, and most good paintings are able to endure these blemishes. Otherwise they aren't very good paintings.

Tumin: But you would distinguish good auras from bad auras?

Rosenberg: That's right, I would. But the bad ones are inevitable.

Tumin: But a work of art has a kind of an historical accretion which consists of all the comments made about it, all the contexts in which it has been put, which don't necessarily comment on the goodness or badness, but only specify it as an historical object?

Rosenberg: That's right.

Tumin: Is that a way of saying what your principal business is? Is it now to discern the current meanings which are being attributed to a particular work of art and to specify them against the background of the previous auras and attributions?

Rosenberg: Well, no, you're going too fast. The first part of your question seems like a good one, and I think one of the things that a

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critic wants to do is to relieve paintings from contemporary murk, from the accumulation of beliefs that have descended upon it, and which no artist meant to be part of his creation. This is a very curious state of affairs in contemporary art. We have painters that have been so overvalued that it is impossible to see that their works are fundamentally ridiculous, or vacuous. We also have a great many people who are ignored because the overevaluation of other painters is always accompanied by the underevaluation of people not like them. So what we have to do in this sense is to create a new balance.

Tumin: You said that some painters and paintings are obviously ridiculous. What makes you say that of a painter, *any painter*?

Rosenberg: It's ridiculous relative to the value that's been placed upon it by criticism, by acceptance.

Tumin: But suppose from the beginning you were willing to say, "This is a ridiculous painting," without there having been a previous assessment of it. Would you be willing to say such a thing?

Rosenberg: I wouldn't feel it necessary to say it, because ridiculous paintings normally tend to sink out of sight. But there are occasions when they don't, when they don't follow the laws of nature, but rather the laws of promotion, and therefore they survive with great honors into the present, at which point an occasion arises when it's necessary to disclose their genuine value or lack of it.

Tumin: Let's pursue that for a minute. Suppose now a museum decides to hang a painting which you find, for a variety of reasons, outrageous on their part because in your estimation the painting is really a ridiculous work. And let's imagine you're writing and trying to tell the museum and others why you think it's a ridiculous work. What are some of the kinds of things that might make you say it's ridiculous or that it's not worthy to have been hung?

Rosenberg: I think you could get a fairly good view of that by going through all the pieces I've written.

Tumin: I started out by saying you've written an enormous amount, and so we'll probably be retreading old ground, but I'd like to get it, if we can, on the record. You're quite right in saying, "Look, you want to know what I think about artwork, I've written several thousand pages. Read the things and you'll see."

Rosenberg: Especially since you're really asking for a list of the kinds of derogation which I've resorted to on particular occasions.

Tumin: Or praise.

Rosenberg: No, now we're talking about bad art that's been overvalued.

Tumin: But we could just as well be talking about good art that's been

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undervalued. It would be the same question as to what are the criteria with which you're operating, such as the importance of the idea. A second criteria that you mentioned to me in a previous conversation was the question of whether the medium was appropriate to the idea. So now I want to ask you whether there is some way of discriminating the limits and possibilities of different media for dealing with different ideas.

Rosenberg: There's something I don't like about that. There is a very important saying in modern painting which regards the medium of painting or of drawing or of materials used in sculpture as having a life of their own and therefore capable of stimulating the kind of thought which in no other way could be achieved. The fact that this is so is one of the reasons why I'm not enthusiastic about conceptual art. Take, for example, Hans Hofmann, who was very explicit about this. He felt that the artist's basic function, basic resource, you might say, is to animate paint. And the paint itself has a certain life which would bring forth a kind of imagery which could not be achieved in any other way. In short, the medium is the original substance of painting. And it's not a medium in the sense of translating an image or an idea into paint, but is itself the creator of the painting. Now not all painters have that idea, and I don't believe that all painters need to have that idea. That is, it's not a definition of what painting does, what painters do, but it's been a very lively and very productive idea, that the medium itself has inner potentialities and a life of its own, as you often hear in regard to the theater and to novels and so on. There's a point at which the artist has become the tool of the medium, rather than the other way around. This is a mysterious thought which has no place in rational thinking.

Tumin: You don't think it can be intellectually discussed to any profit?

Rosenberg: I don't see how you could demonstrate this. But nonetheless, I say it's a kind of belief among painters that think paint in itself has the possibility of becoming a thinking substance.

Tumin: This is different than saying that the painting of the last twenty years or so has been about painting.

Rosenberg: It is different. It's not necessary at all that the painting that will arise out of the self-activity, let's say, of paint will be about painting. It might be about the artist, it might be about the combination of the artist and works of the past. It has been, you might say, a superstition, or belief, or conviction of painters of a certain mode that the medium has an evocative character, as if the

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canvas thinks. The canvas itself becomes the brain, the imagination. You may say that in art there is an externalization of the mind into the medium.

Tumin: What, then, of the idea that the subject matter of much of recent painting has been the act of painting itself?

Rosenberg: It's one way in which that thought has been formulated, and it's not incorrect, but it's also not the whole story.

Tumin: Would you never as a critic comment about the appositeness or inappositeness of the medium for the problem or the idea?

Rosenberg: I wouldn't say, this doesn't really belong in painting, maybe it belongs in a nineteenth century novel.

Tumin: You would not say that.

Rosenberg: No.

Tumin: What, then, of a third criterion: how imaginatively and knowledgeably does the artist realize the possibilities and powers of the media?

Rosenberg: I don't think in those terms. I'm a synthetic thinker, that is, I talk about concrete situations.

Tumin: If I go through your writing, I can show you you're much more than concrete. There is always implicit, almost explicit, though not usually, a set of operative criteria by which you're making judgments.

Rosenberg: That's right. I don't just say I think this painting is good or bad.

Tumin: That's right, and you say why.

Rosenberg: I say why.

Tumin: And you say conceptually why, not just concretely why.

Rosenberg: That's right, but if you want to generalize those generalizations, you have to do it. I don't generalize my generalizations.

Tumin: But one is permitted to ask whether this is a fair statement of your generalizations.

Rosenberg: I don't know. I haven't analyzed which generalization you're referring to. I've been doing this for about twenty-five years, at least, and I can't put the sum total into a few formulas. Let me quote something else Baudelaire said. He used to be an art reviewer, which I'm not. I don't run around as much as he did. He used to review the salons and gallery shows, and he said it often occurred to him that his life would be much easier if he had a set of ideas which he could apply to paintings and he would be able to go into a show and apply his system and come up with judgements of the paintings. He tried to work out such a system and he said it was a disaster because either

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the system he developed didn't apply to the paintings he saw, or he got so bored with the system he didn't care whether it applied or not. He didn't want to use it. So he said he had to start all over again with each painting he looked at, with each show he looked at.

Tumin: But that's pretended innocence and naiveté. He's got a whole history of sophistication. He obviously doesn't start all over.

Rosenberg: He starts all over with the totality of his temperament and his sensibilities. He cannot in advance say, I'm going to look at this painting from this point of view in order to arrive at this value. Now, that's what you're asking me to do, and I agree completely with Baudelaire. I have no capacity to do that. I cannot make a set of rules or criteria which will be useful to me when I go to a show. I can't go there with a set of ideas in mind. I don't have those ideas. When I look at the paintings a great many ideas may appear or manifest themselves as of some importance in regard to this particular work. But I have no set of ideas that would be applicable to *any* kind of work. That is to say, the ideas are present only insofar as the experience of the work wants to make them present. Otherwise, I don't know what the work is about. That's why very often I look at works and have no opinions about them. I have to wait until I develop an opinion or concentrate on developing an opinion which comes from a kind of psychological immersion in that work, and then various ideas begin to appear that seem relevant and which also establish what I think about the work. In other words, the judgment that I arrive at is the result of an activity carried on in relation to this particular work. Now, I think any other approach to criticism is dogmatic. I don't care how good the ideas are or could be. That's one of the reasons why I don't have too much use for Freudians or Marxists or any other systematic criticism. I don't think it's relevant. It may or might not be relevant. I mean, if Meyer looks at the apples of Cézanne and gets all these ideas about the history of apples and human culture, the history of apples in paintings, the history of apples in regard to sex, all this to me, as I said before, is wholly legitimate from Meyer's response to the apples of Cézanne. But it doesn't at all follow that any of this would occur to me while I'm looking at a Cézanne, and I don't think that would be a disaster, that I didn't think of them in those ideas.

Tumin: Is it also legitimate, as some political-minded cab driver once said, that all painting, except that done by Rockwell Kent and Siquieros, is a handmaiden and servile tool of capitalism?

Rosenberg: Well, let's say, legitimate or not, it's rather typical. It's

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exceptionally narrow. He's only got two artists, after all, and not the best. But most people think about art that way. That is, they have a set of legitimized artists and the rest of art may be totally hopeless to them. In fact, that's exactly what goes on all the time. That cab driver is typical, in that he has a few icons which constitute the whole field of art for him. And that's what I was talking about before in relation to the criticism of the past fifteen years, in which a certain type of problem-solving has been the criterion for art.

Tumin: I want to get back to the question of conceptualizing the judgmental and evaluational and critical process. Because it is possible to do it in science, to specify, say, a dozen criteria that somehow must be met by a work of science before you would say it's good, as against being a bad work of science. It's possible to do it with athletics.

Rosenberg: You can do it with all sorts of things.

Tumin: Can you not do it with artwork?

Rosenberg: People do it all the time.

Tumin: Do you think it's wrong to do it?

Rosenberg: I think that the critic's experience of a particular work is the animating force which evokes various ideas, which, furthermore, are always evoked in terms of a given rhetoric. I don't leave out the question of style. That is to say, I can't have what I would consider a valid discussion, on my part, of a painting unless that discussion is carried on in a certain style, which happens to be the way I use words in thinking. In other words, the critic after all is a writer, and that is basic. Somebody who can't write can't be a critic. There is no such thing as having good ideas badly phrased in art criticism, any more than there is such a thing as having a very good idea badly written as a poem.

Tumin: There is very badly written good science.

Rosenberg: That can very well be. This is one of the important differences between art and science.

Tumin: Or is it between criticism of science as against criticism of art? Do you think that's really different, too?

Rosenberg: Yes, absolutely. There is no objective measure of a work of art.

Tumin: There are no objective criteria?

Rosenberg: There are no objective criteria.

Tumin: The objective criteria in other fields are simply those which specialists agree upon. Are there no such objective criteria in the same sense in art?

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Rosenberg: No.

Tumin: Why?

Rosenberg: It's a phony analogy which people who are educated in the modern university keep trying to establish, that is, the analogy between art and science. They're always looking for the same kind of precision, the same kind of consensus.

Tumin: I agree with you that precision is quite different in the two fields, both in painting and science, and in the criticism of painting and science, that consensus is present in science and not present in art.

Rosenberg: No, as a matter of fact, there's a very strong consensus in art, but it does not necessarily mean that it's acceptable. That is, art criticism, as Baudelaire said, is polemical. You establish your idea about works of art, you don't accept the consensus. Because your basic criterion is your experience of the work of art, and everybody's experience of the work of art is different.

Tumin: But they're not all wholly unique and fresh and innocent. They're always operating within a cultural context.

Rosenberg: It may come about that some people agree about some artists. And they may agree about them for a certain length of time, too, in which case you would have what appears to be a consensus. If anybody carries this further, and begins to inquire to what you and he and X agree upon, when you think that Pollock is a good artist, you would find that you are all talking about something else. Now you must know that's true.

Tumin: Is there no way in which to get consensus on a set of criteria by which some works of art could be judged to be superior to others, in the same fashion as we get consensus on criteria by which to judge works of science?

Rosenberg: There's no doubt that some works of art are in one sense or another superior to other works of art. We're not arguing that all works of art are equal. But the notion that a consensus that would apply in the discipline, let's call it, of physics or biology or something like that would necessarily have its counterpart in art seems to me totally arbitrary. One of the reasons why the sciences have become so important in modern technological society, as against art, is precisely because the society is held together on a rational plane and not held together, as it used to be, on a plane of a kind of universal recognition. That is to say, we don't assume that the intelligent person that we're talking to and with whom we might agree about various ideas has the same feelings that we have. We

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don't assume that he has the same background. We don't assume that he's had the same kind of unity or coherence in his life.

Tumin: Why do you say that? If you and I go, let's say, if we talked for many years and we have sort of developed a set of unstated, commonly shared assumptions about some things, and if we go, let's say, to a movie or we go to a museum or we go to a concert, isn't it likely that we're going to have many of the same reactions, or at least we will know what the other one is likely to feel, given our knowledge of each other's reactions in the past?

Rosenberg: Well, you're making a postulate which doesn't exist in the art world, that is, that we know each other for years, that we've been talking to each other, that we have various things in common to begin with that made us friends. We're now talking about a totally different matter. We're talking about a field of activity called art which has been invaded by many things. Let me give you some ideas of what invades art. Historically, Western art was invaded in the nineteenth century by Chinese art or by Japanese art, subsequently by African art, later on by pre-Columbian art, by the art of the streets and the backwoods, that is to say, by naive art, by ecclesiastical art, by all kinds of elements and styles. Now that does not happen in any science. You do not have a tremendous flood of phenomena and concepts that are unrelated to one another making their way into the center of physics and deciding what is valuable in physics. You have a continuous tradition which is one of the reasons why science has managed to hold its line of development more or less, and has been able, as they say, to progress. In art such a development does not exist. Think of the element of alienness that enters into works of art at any given moment. For example, right now something new has been dug up somewhere which nobody has ever seen before and is being put on display in the European museums. It's just been excavated and now is being put on display in a big museum and will undoubtedly influence artists and art itself.

Now, how can we enter into such a melange with the idea of a consensus? To me, this is totally absurd. Even if you get two people who know each other, who are sitting around with the same artists for half their lifetime, you get the most violent disagreement. I'll give you a concrete example. Barnett Newman had a retrospective a few years ago for which Tom Hess wrote the catalog, and he found that Barnett Newman was interested in Hassidism. He interpreted his work in terms of Hassidic number relations, and Annalee Newman, who is the widow of Barnett, was indignant at the way in which

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Tom translated Barney into a Hassid. Barney was interested in Hassidism. But he was also interested in baseball; he was interested in discotheques; he was interested in dozens of things. His triumph was to make a unity that transcended these interests, but that would also include them in some kind of a very individual way. The moment Hess reduced—and I'm underlining reduced—Barney's interest to Hassidism, he was completely wrong. Yet people have seized upon Hess's interpretation because they would like to find some specific content in Newman's paintings, and it's much more difficult to find this other content, that is, the content of being a modernist in New York who is interested occasionally in some Hassidic phrase and finds some interesting thought in a wonder-working rabbi. How can you have a consensus, when the object itself is an amalgam of so many cultural elements, psychological elements, elements of invention, elements of arbitrary decision? Is somebody supposed to see the art object in the same way that a pre-modern society saw such objects? To make a meaning out of Newman is, and again I go back to Baudelaire, a polemical act. I say his paintings mean this; somebody may agree with me, but nobody has agreed with me before I said it.

Tumin: Well, but I see a level of possible consensus among you and lots of other people who might disagree about the elements in Barnett Newman and in other people, but who would commonly agree that an important quality in Newman, along with other first-rate painters or artists, is the extent to which, to paraphrase Baudelaire, there is the evocation of a rich imagination in contact with the experiences of his own life and with the objects in the external world, represented with great skill on the canvas.

Rosenberg: But that's about the emptiest abstraction you could think of. A good artist is a good artist.

Tumin: But so is it an empty abstraction to say that a scientific theory is elegant.

Rosenberg: No, there's more to it. Many concrete, quite visible aspects of Newman's paintings have to be brought to light when you're talking about him, and it has nothing to do with his just being skillful. You see, when you use the word skill you fall into the typical humanistic trap, which is to associate modern art with the crafts of the Renaissance, and of all the art up to the modern time. That is, the concept of skill has to do with craft. By this time nobody cares about skill. You have to make up your own skills. Newman made up his own skill. His skill isn't the skill of any other painter, anymore than Pollock's skill was the skill of any other painter.

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You make up your own art. This is the period of the one-man culture, and each artist attempts, in a kind of megalomaniacal way, as exemplified, say, by Mondrian, to capture the whole culture and stimulate unity which in the future will provide a consensus based on his invention. Read my piece about Mondrian where it's very clear that Mondrian had in mind the elimination of all other art in order to produce a society where everyone would grasp Mondrian emotionally without thinking about him at all. The ultimate purpose of modernist sophistication is to arrive at a state of absolute naiveté that would be equivalent to the immediacy of a tribesman in an African village. The ultimate aim of many outstanding twentieth century artists is to produce a kraal situation in which it wouldn't be necessary to have any art critics. You don't need art critics in an African village. Everybody knows exactly what the thing is by immediate apprehension. We talk about art because we do nothing else with it. We must arrive at our individual relations to it first, and then proceed to offer that experience to others. How much good it does, we don't know.

Tumin: With what intention do you offer it to others? Leaving aside for the moment money, fame and all that stuff which may or may not be relevant, why do you write? Why do you write so forcefully about painting? Is any part of your motive an intention to try to get other people to see paintings as you see them?

Rosenberg: Of course, of course.

Tumin: Hoping they will come to share your criteria of judgment and perception?

Rosenberg: No, not my criteria; my *opinion* about this particular work. I don't want them to become like me. I don't want to create a crowd of art critics. I don't want them to write about art. I want them to see what I saw in this work of art. That's all.

Tumin: Rather than having a more general ambition of hoping to have a lot of people learn to see in general the way you see?

Rosenberg: I don't know how I see in general. So if I had the ambition that you attribute to me, I'd be writing about aesthetics. And I have the least possible use for aesthetics. I see no interest in it whatsoever. I even read the *Journal of Aesthetics.* I find it practically impossible to find anything in it that's of interest.

Tumin: So a book like Nelson Goodman's *The Languages of Art* is of no use to you?

Rosenberg: Absolutely of no interest to me whatsoever.

Tumin: Let me read one quotation and see if it's not interesting to you, because it raises some other interesting general points. Near the

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end of his book Goodman says, on the question of merit, "To say that a work of art is good or even to say how good it is does not after all provide much information. It does not tell us whether the work is evocative, robust, vibrant or exquisitely designed and still less what are its salient specific qualities of color, shape or sound. Moreover, works of art are not racehorses and picking a winner is not a primary goal."

Rosenberg: So far, so good.

Tumin: Goodman then goes on, "Rather than judgments of particular characteristics being a mere means toward an ultimate appraisal, judgments of aesthetic value are often means toward discovering such characteristics. If a connoisseur tells me that one of two Cycladic idols that seem to me almost indistinguishable is much finer than the other, this inspires me to look for and may help me find the significant differences between the two. Estimates of excellence are among the minor aids to insight. Judging the excellence of works of art or the goodness of people is not the best way of understanding them. And the criterion of aesthetic merit is no more the major aim of aesthetics than the criterion of virtue is the major aim of psychology." Would you agree with that?

Rosenberg: Yes, I'd agree with that. They're all negative statements.

Tumin: But you're both really discarding what other people would like to attribute to you or to aestheticians.

Rosenberg: Aestheticians don't make judgments on works of art, they develop theories about aesthetics.

Tumin: Let me turn to that domain called aesthetics because, in a rough way, art is in the domain of the aesthetic. Are there no special terms that distinguish the domain in which your enterprise as a critic is located from the terms which people use for other domains? Isn't there a specifiable set of concerns that you as a critic take on and that other people have found valuable, and your writing about them sufficiently informative and excellent to wish to hear more from you about those particular kinds of questions?

Rosenberg: I don't know what those questions are. I think they've all disintegrated. If you look at the art in the past twenty years, it's extremely difficult to say that anything is left over from the old beauty and truth formulation. For one thing, art is definitely not concerned with beauty. What is it concerned with? It's almost impossible to say. The only definition I could think of in recent years was to say that it's concerned with anything that isn't in the category of something else. It has become a domain outside other domains.

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Tumin: But each domain is outside of every other domain.

Rosenberg: But this one is outside of domains in general. In other words, if you make a psychological analysis and write it down and print it in a book or an article, it is recognizable as psychology. But if you make a psychological statement that has no reference to known concepts in psychology and is hardly identifiable even as psychology, you may hang it in an art gallery as a conceptual work of art. All I'm saying is that art is ultimately in the social-historical domain and, if society has decided to accept otherwise indefinable activities as works of art, it's pointless for you to say, "Society is wrong, art is really like *this*"—unless you set up the old academic "realm of the beautiful." When the realm of the beautiful collapsed, and the realm of the beautiful, of course, is related to other ideal realms, and art became a positivistic set of phenomena, you could not establish any set of criteria except the ones you establish on the basis of your own experience and which you enforce by the strength of your own rhetoric. That is to say, art has become totally polemical. I was defeated in the sixties by the overriding power of the public relations of what I consider to be terrible art. There was nothing I could do about it. I wrote one piece saying that criticism used to come before the work was accepted by society, but that now criticism comes when works are already beyond dispute. You can keep on repeating over and over again that X (I don't want to mention any names in this context) is not even an artist. He doesn't even use a medium. He's a guy who is an artist insofar as he's known to be an artist.

Tumin: If two other people call him an artist, he's an artist?

Rosenberg: No, it's like the phrase, he's famous for being famous. This artist is famous for being a famous artist. When you look at his work there's nothing there. But he's famous for being a famous artist. He will appear in various shows, inevitably. He belongs to the history of the decade and his "work" can bring all sorts of fancy prices from collectors and become a staple part of the museums. Now what am I going to do about that?

Tumin: You would have something to say about why he's no longer an artist, wouldn't you?

Rosenberg: I've said it and it's produced no effect whatsoever, except to bring denunciations. I know why he's not an artist and I know also why he's successful as a non-artist. That's more important because that's sociological.

Tumin: In your article on Jasper Johns you said, "Reacting to painting as a social reality, Johns and other post-Abstract Expres-

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sionists looked back to Duchamp, as the disillusioned analyst of the relation between art today and other man-made things, and forward to Andy Warhol, as the artist changed into a media celebrity and manufacturer of art substitutes." Now it's quite clear you have some clear notion as to the limits and possibilities of art such that you're now saying Warhol in these works is not an artist.

Rosenberg: I said he was a manufacturer of art substitutes.

Tumin: Now, are you not able, if someone says, why is this an art substitute and not a piece of art, are you not able to say why?

Rosenberg: Yes, there's a previous article on Andy Warhol which explains why he's a manufacturer of art substitutes.

Tumin: In which you clearly state what an art substitute is as against a piece of art?

Rosenberg: Oh, yes, and how he became a media celebrity.

Tumin: So you're not adverse to saying what are the criteria a piece of art must meet in order to be called a work of art?

Rosenberg: No, no. I don't approach the problem that way.

Tumin: You aimed the problem that way by saying he's not an artist any more.

Rosenberg: In my article on Andy Warhol I explain exactly what he does; why he's accepted as an artist; what he doesn't do, and how he should be evaluated.

Tumin: And therefore why you think he's not an artist.

Rosenberg: No, that's not important. I agree with Goodman that's not important.

Tumin: "As the artist changes into media celebrity and manufacturer of art substitutes." You meant very pointedly to say he's no longer an artist.

Rosenberg: I was speaking of a trend in art, a change in the figure of the artist. You want to pin me down to Warhol. A species of gossip.

Tumin: That means to say also you have certain touchstones or criteria by which you're making that judgment. I'm not going to press you to make them explicit. But why do you say, "No, I don't have any general ideas?" Why do you say that?

Rosenberg: There's no general idea involved in that, there's just the concrete idea that Andy Warhol represents a new kind of artist: "Media celebrity and manufacturer of art substitutes." I like that better than anything you're going to be able to drag out of me.

Tumin: But by what criteria? You obviously have criteria, don't you?

Rosenberg: Not necessarily. Maybe I just say it on an authoritarian basis.

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Tumin: No, you don't mean that. You mean that you do have firm ideas about what something has to be in order to be called a decent work of art. But when anyone presses you into a corner on that, you try to jump around the corner and not respond to that. Why? I can understand you don't want to be known for saying, "Here are only five criteria all works of art have to be to be called works of art."

Rosenberg: You have an obsession with criteria.

Tumin: You have an obsession with evading criteria. We have commonly opposed obsessions.

Rosenberg: I don't believe in them. I have already explained to you that whatever concepts you use when you're discussing a work of art arise out of your experience with that work of art, and not because you have certain criteria. If you have certain criteria you have to apply them in all cases. And furthermore, I like some people who make art substitutes.

Tumin: Fine, but you talk about experiencing a work of art. It's not a completely *tabula rasa* that you experience the work of art with? You experience it with a set of expectations, don't you?

Rosenberg: No, I don't know what they are until I look at the work. Then I may discover that I have expectations. But they may be different in this case than in another. Take that thing over there. You see that photograph over there? That's a work of art, created by Saul Steinberg. It's a fake photograph. Now he's much better at creating fake art than Andy Warhol. But his fake art is very legitimate.

Tumin: Whereas Warhol's fake art is unintentionally fake?

Rosenberg: It *is* intentionally fake. He even says so himself. I'm not even insulting him. He says, don't even bother to look at this stuff. He said to a woman who writes about art, "Let's get the hell out of here and have a drink, you don't want to look at this stuff." He knows what he's doing. He's fooling around with his public, and it's perfectly legitimate to fool around with the public insofar as it's that stupid. I want to go back to what you said, you can't be that naive. One of the things, one of the great ideas of Baudelaire was his idea of the naive critic. If you want to read the conceptual development of this idea, read it in Baudelaire. He said the critic should be naive.

What did he mean by naive? He didn't mean that he had no brains, or that he was illiterate, or anything like that. By naive he meant that he had a will to something, and that he would pursue that desire regardless of what the situation was. A naive person is somebody who wants something, has a point of view. Now, whether or not that point of view can be expressed as an ideology is another

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matter. I'm certainly not arguing that the question of value is unimportant or that it doesn't exist. I think it exists, and one of the most important things in our society is that people should have clear and intelligent reactions to works of art. I don't believe that they're going to arrive at these clear, intelligent evaluations by developing a system of criteria. I remember when as a kid I read Barnes' book on art, and he gave criteria for judging works of art. Suppose you had ten criteria, memorized them, and started looking at a painting? You'd go nuts. It's not the way one thinks—to count off traits.

If you had a set of criteria and you went around and said, "All right, let's try A on this thing. Now we'll try B" . . . first of all, I can't even remember them. If I had *five* criteria I wouldn't remember them. I'd have to have them written down.

I once tried to do that in buying a house. I didn't know anything about houses and I had to decide whether or not to buy this house. So I said to an associate of mine, "You're interested in real estate. What does one look for when buying a house?" He wrote down eight criteria: Are the sills rotted? Is the water O.K.? And so on. I went out to East Hampton and I poked around to check the criteria. The pump wasn't working, so I couldn't tell whether the water was any good. The roof was leaking . . . that was bad. I went through the eight criteria. In regard to three of them I couldn't establish the facts. But the real problem was, I didn't know how to weigh the criteria against each other. If three things were lousy, that is, the roof leaked and two other things were no good, and two were good and two I couldn't ascertain, did this mean I should buy the house or not? My critic had failed to give me a scale. So I tore up the piece of paper and bought the house. As it happened, I did the right thing.

Tumin: The analogy you're making, it seems to me, is both appropriate and inappropriate.

Rosenberg: It's appropriate insofar as you have a practical problem. Criteria are useful in buying cars. But in art you don't have a practical problem.

Tumin: Well, an art critic has a practical problem.

Rosenberg: Whât's the practical problem?

Tumin: What do I think about this painting?

Rosenberg: That's not a practical problem. The practical problem is when a collector comes up to me and says, "Should I buy this for $10,000?" That's a practical problem. I never answer such questions. I say, "Go and see Clem Greenberg. He gives advice to collectors. I just write about art. I don't know anything about the market. I don't know how much you should pay for anything."

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Tumin: Well, but for you a practical problem is that you have a column to do. And you have to say something about something you've seen. You have to ask yourself, What shall I say about it? Now, you're not going to talk about how the canvas was made of Belgian linen, which was extracted by a process known to the ancient Assyrians. And you're also not going to talk about the whiteness of the walls around the frame, unless it gets in the way of you're not being able to see it. There are lots of things that are excluded from your view when you take on the practical task of the critic, aren't there?

Rosenberg: By practical task, you mean?

Tumin: The things that you require of yourself, given your enterprise.

Rosenberg: Yes, sure.

Tumin: Okay, that doesn't settle anything. But it leads to an important question to ask you. Please go into the make-believe realm with me. If somehow you could have the power to determine what should be hung in museums, would you like that?

Rosenberg: You mean, would I like the responsibility of deciding?

Tumin: The power to decide what should go into museums.

Rosenberg: The thing that complicates that is the question of what I think about museums and their functions.

Tumin: Well, I don't want to get into that. I'll put it more generally. If you could shape the taste of a generation, would you like to do that?

Rosenberg: The taste? No, I don't believe in taste. That's an obsolete concept.

Tumin: Wrong word?

Rosenberg: Yes. Not taste. *Values,* yes.

Tumin: If you could shape the values of a generation with regard to works of art, would you like that?

Rosenberg: Would I like it?

Tumin: Yes, would you relish that prospect?

Rosenberg: Do you mean, do I feel sufficiently confident in my own views to want to . . .

Tumin: Yes, that's one aspect of it. Do you feel sufficiently confident in your own point of view to say that if only others were able somehow to share my point of view the world of art would be better off? I don't think it would be arrogant of you to say that, if that's what you felt like saying.

Rosenberg: You're trying to lead me to . . .

Tumin: I'm coming to art and politics. That's where I'm coming.

Rosenberg: Your question is not one I can answer because if I did, as you say, shape the values of a generation, the question is, what

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would they do with that when they've had that experience. I have no way of knowing that. You know, I've had influence in certain places and for a certain length of time. I don't know what comes out of that. Very often, you know, people say to me, I was very much influenced by you, and then I see what they're doing. *Es vehrt mir nit gutt.* How do you know what other people do with your way of looking at things? Some of the worst art around today is definitely owing to my theories. No question about it. I can make a direct line from some of the works that I can least stand to a concept of action painting and various other ideas which I have let loose.

Tumin: Well, as we all know, all great prophets get misused and abused.

Rosenberg: I'm not sore. It's just that you can't tell what the logic of your ideas is in the minds of others. What would be nice, the thing that would be desirable and that to me would be a constituent aspect of a culture, would be that one's ideas should be related to a center of discussion, so that they should be elaborated in different directions at the moment that they appeared. In that way, they'd correct themselves in one's own mind, too. But one characteristic, as you know, of our culture is isolation. No matter how much publication or publicity you get, or no matter how much your ideas are talked about, you rarely have any genuine discussion of what they mean. So you don't get the kind of correction or elaboration of your ideas which could be useful to you. This is one of the characteristics of American culture.

Tumin: That leads us to two connected topics—not connected with the critic, but connected with the artist. Sometimes it's said painters or writers shape the consciousness of a society. You're familiar with that kind of statement. Lots of painters and writers say, What the hell, we've never had the slightest influence on the consciousness of a society. Is that a question to which you can respond? Have there been times when paintings and other works of art have, in fact, had an important influence on the general consciousness of a society? Let's admit that in Christian art, when everything else was conjoint, and there was a homogeneous culture . . .

Rosenberg: Well, then, you can't talk about influence. They're part of the same thing.

Tumin: But have you seen occasions when painting has altered consciousness in important directions?

Rosenberg: Important directions is the stumbling block in that question, because there's no doubt that, for example, in the realm of

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fashion, which in turn has a very strong effect on masses of people, painting has been very influential since the war. All you have to do is to look at fabric design and interior design.

Tumin: All right, let's go beyond that and talk about political consciousness.

Rosenberg: No, it's not possible that these changes should not in turn have an effect on what people think in general, that is to say, morally.

Tumin: You think it has had an important effect?

Rosenberg: Of course it has.

Tumin: Give me a connecting link if you can. Give me a concrete series of connecting links.

Rosenberg: You can't do that. If you try to create a set of causal links, if you try to create a causal chain, you're getting into the realm of the absurd. The only thing you can do is show a kind of synchronization of certain attitudes in art and literature and politics. Now of course we have the mass media, the effect of art on the mass media, and the effect of the media on art. This is a most important thing. You remember I talked about that in Stanford. Most contemporary discussions of art in relation to society are worthless because they don't take into effect the reciprocal pressures of art on the mass media and the media on art. The media on art, because it is the pressure of the masses on art. Let's say TV takes up painting. Immediately, an audience of hundreds of thousands. They don't know anything about art. The TV program is made up so they don't have to know anything about art. Of course a terrible distortion takes place inherently. The artist tends to collaborate in this because he's delighted to have such a huge audience. People are looking at his paintings which are reproduced, of course in a totally falsified way, on the TV screen. So you get a constant interchange of falsifications, of stupid ideas, of clichés, all weighing on the art world. The situation today is fantastic. Every weekend I receive in the mail at least two announcements by galleries I've never heard of before. The number of operating art galleries is inconceivable to me. The Poindexter Gallery, which is twenty or twenty-five years old, folded up the other week. But the same day at least four new galleries sprang into view.

Tumin: I can see the influence on galleries, and customers and publics. Do you see that influence from the media being exerted and responded to in any serious way by people whom you would consider serious artists?

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Rosenberg: You don't know how people are affected. I know some serious artists who are so morally decrepit that they would be affected by anything.

Tumin: They would start painting in terms of what they think was now going to sell, given the new publicity?

Rosenberg: No, but they might make works in styles that have been successful with the media.

Tumin: Instead of going on to new problems?

Rosenberg: "Problems" again. The wrong word. If they were a little hungry, they might think of a new idea. I know artists that have gotten new ideas because the old ones weren't selling anymore. But if you have a market that keeps expanding, you do more and more of the same thing. It goes without saying. What do you think artists are?

Tumin: A touch of poverty is good for the semination of new ideas?

Rosenberg: There's no question about that. How can you ask such a question? Affluence is heady, you know, and a very dubious condition to develop new ideas, or even to hold on to old ones.

Tumin: But you wouldn't be willing to say. . ?

Rosenberg: Starvation is also bad.

Tumin: It's impossible to state the best conditions under which you would get the freest flowing of ideas?

Rosenberg: Yes, Tolstoy once said that government support of the arts is terrible, because an artist who is well off will never produce a work of art.

Tumin: Do you agree?

Rosenberg: No, because starvation is also bad. Tolstoy is the last guy in the world who should talk about a subject like that. If he had any sense of good manners, he would know that that is not a subject for him to discuss.

Tumin: What else would you say about the impact of art on other institutions in society?

Rosenberg: You mean, like on the Congress?

Tumin: On political values.

Rosenberg: We now have a politician in the Senate named Claiborne Pell who has made a big thing out of art. We have another one in the House.

Tumin: On fundamental values? Where art really affects fundamental values?

Rosenberg: It doesn't have a direct effect. If you're going to find it, you have to crawl through sewers. You can't find a direct effect of art on politics. Especially in the age of the media. What kind of effect can a

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painting have, compared to the constant pouring out of editorial matter, and phony stories in newspapers and on television?

Tumin: Then why are the Bolsheviks of today so worried about their art?

Rosenberg: You mean in Russia?

Tumin: In Russia and Eastern Europe.

Rosenberg: There's nothing more upsetting to a society than the loss of prestige of its accepted forms. The Russians are perfectly right about this. You'll find a discussion of that in one of my books—an analysis of why Kruschev was so upset when abstract artists showed up.

Tumin: Why should he be upset if art is so inconsequential?

Rosenberg: There seems to be a contradiction there. But in Russia—a tight society, as opposed, say, to democratic countries where art is in competition with the media, and the media are all saying different things, and there is a general melange, so that nothing is very authoritative—in Russia the notion that in some field freedom should reign, that is, that individuals should begin to make statements, visual statements which don't concur with what has been accepted as august and noble in art could be extremely upsetting. Valéry once said that one of the biggest cultural revolutions that ever took place was painting the nude. If people are used to seeing the human body in costume, and you suddenly take off the costume, it's a disaster. The strains go all through society, and not for sexual reasons either, but because the customary appearance of things has been disrupted.

Tumin: So it's not the question of what particularly is said, but the fact that someone is speaking freely, rather than speaking in accordance with the accepted formula.

Rosenberg: Exactly. The Communists always insisted that abstract art has no content, that it is purely subjective. Kruschev, I think, used the term masturbation. Well, he wouldn't get sore if people sat around masturbating in private. But what if hundreds of people came out and began masturbating in Red Square? The government would object—you're not supposed to do that. This is the kind of thing that would become an individual statement, which is intolerable.

Tumin: Are you willing to say something about the social and political context that is most supportive of good art, all other things being equal? That is, what are the political and social conditions under which art as an enterprise can flourish the most?

Rosenberg: You mean, are there some societies that are better for art

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than some other societies? That's a very serious question, because it's quite obvious that the social conditions that are best suited to art are those which produce a total social coherence. Primitive societies, medieval European society, the transitional society from medieval into a freer society. All these are good because values are well-established.

Tumin: Why is that good?

Rosenberg: Great art has been produced in those societies—such as ancient Egyptian and Babylonian. These are societies that produced great art under conditions of slavery or near slavery. And in Africa and other pre-industrial societies, the arts flourish as an everyday activity. It's obvious now, in the late twentieth century, that this is completely valid art. We're not talking about some kind of clumsy whittling. This is great art that comes out of Africa and pre-Columbian American sources.

Tumin: You really want to use the words "great art?"

Rosenberg: I don't want to use the words great art, but there's no doubt that it's an art that deserves the highest respect. We don't know enough about it, and if we use the word "great" we're being foolish, because we don't know what the measure is.

Tumin: So your use of the word "great" was a slip.

Rosenberg: Yes, I would say I don't know how to measure a Benin sculpture against Michelangelo. I don't know what kind of a line to draw. But, I will say that all those concepts of art, the village . . . I mean, this is what you get from the anthropoligists who keep telling you that, if you want to have great work you have to have a coherent society. We've heard it from T. S. Eliot; we've heard it from neo-Catholics; we've heard from all kinds of people that a disciplined, unanimous society will produce the best work. We've heard this also from avant garde artists, from constructivists. We've heard this, as I've said before, from Mondrian. You have to have, in other words, a total society. No private life, as Mondrian put it. Get rid of private life. Put everything in public squares, and you'll have a big square. You'll have a nice, well-wrought rectangle, right? Now, what's the matter with that idea? It's a very powerful idea. It keeps coming up in art all the time. It has a lot to do with that idea of impersonality, and reduction of the individual. That's the one thing. Get rid of the individual, and you'll have great art, spirituality, social coherence, communication, everything. Just get rid of that one little bedbug.

Tumin: But no one said to Michelangelo, get rid of your bedbug.

Rosenberg: That wasn't their problem. Their problem was to become more bedbuggy than ever. They were breaking *out* of something.

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Humanism was breaking out of those disciplines and into the belief in the individual. We're living in a period when the individual has become a suspect character. After all, who commits crimes? Dissatisfied individuals. Do away with individuals, and you won't have any criminals. Do away with individuals, and you won't have any social disruption. You don't have all kinds of things. In the propaganda of Communism, the individual is the hated element. Not only Communism, the whole industrial system hates the individual. The industrial system is not geared to providing you with what you want, it's geared to providing you, as a consumer, with what it makes. So you've got all these forces against the individual. He's the only thing that prevents the technological solution from having validity. But we've already contracted this disease.

Tumin: Which disease?

Rosenberg: The disease of individuality. We've had it, according to some people, for 700 years. According to others, it goes back as far as the Greeks; to still others, back to Abraham. There is the tradition that there is such a thing as being an individual. We can't be happy for some reason unless we've got something to do with it.

Tumin: In that period great works of art have occurred?

Rosenberg: You have to have that kind of art in order to satisfy that residual organism, the individual. There will be no art of any importance or interest without the decaying organism called the individual.

Tumin: Are you saying, then, that the kind of society we have now, for all its pressures toward homogeneity, for all the dastardly pressures of the media, is nevertheless extremely rich in its possibilities for art precisely because of the great stress on individuality that also accompanies the contrary stress?

Rosenberg: There is no stress on individuality.

Tumin: But you are also saying that we have contracted the disease, which is a way of saying that many of us refuse to be only robots, or only automatons.

Rosenberg: Look, some people can get very enthusiastic about self-immolation, and to get rid of their little bit of personality affords them a tremendous satisfaction. Conformism is the biggest force in our society today. You know that.

Tumin: There has never been a society, however, in which there have been so many different sub-cultures to which you could conform, and in which, in effect, so much non-conformity, so much deviation, has been permitted.

Rosenberg: By permitted, you mean what? You don't get locked up?

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Tumin: You don't get locked up, you don't get penalized, and increasingly every day greater and newer varities of behavior are accepted as part and parcel of reasonable public behavior, however distasteful you may find them.

Rosenberg: And your question is, is this good for art?

Tumin: Well, I'm saying, isn't that a correct characterization of our society, and, if it is, is it or is it not good for art?

Rosenberg: There's no doubt that the way things are is the only thing that we know of that's good for art. We cannot conceive, without entering into a destructive utopianism, of better situations for art than the one that exists.

Tumin: You mean at any time?

Rosenberg: No, now.

Tumin: You mean, is that true of anybody in any society at any time?

Rosenberg: No.

Tumin: You're now making a judgment about all historical periods and saying this is really the richest?

Rosenberg: Not the richest, it's the only thing we can do. This is a predicament. This isn't a situation that we have chosen. But there can't be a better one that we can think of. We tried that in the thirties. We tried to conceive of a better situation, and people became involved, as you know, with all these organizations and with social expectations. It was no damn good for art. The only thing we can think of that would be good for art is intensification and deepening of individual experience.

Tumin: Which means, also, freedom. More and more freedom.

Rosenberg: Yes, we can't think of a single thing that would benefit art today except to be more ourselves, more affirmative.

Tumin: Are you being ironic, though, when you say that?

Rosenberg: No.

Tumin: You say we can't think anymore. It sounds like, how pitiful our imaginations are that we can't think of anything more than that.

Rosenberg: That's the limit of my imagination anyway, and I've been watching this game for a long time, and I haven't seen a single idea that has come forward that wasn't worse than the idea that art depends on individuals. That is, all the modern art that I know of does that.

Tumin: And who will have the freedom and the resources with which to try to express themselves?

Rosenberg: That's right. We don't know how to promote freedom. It's a subjective matter. People have to seize freedom. We know all about

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freedom when it's not there. We know what could be done in Chile and Brazil. But we don't know what could be done here, because, in a way, there isn't much of a limitation on freedom here. The limitation is from within. There's no use saying that we're all corrupted by General Motors, or by television, because you don't have to be corrupted by General Motors or by television.

Tumin: What, then, would you say about such things as the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the National Endowment for the Arts, with their various grant programs (leaving aside for the moment the question of whether some of their judgments have been good or bad)? In general, is the idea of providing greater resources for a larger number of people, whom various committees judge to be reasonably good and promising, is that good? Or do you find that a dangerous movement in our government?

Rosenberg: I am studying those developments and I find them increasingly suspect.

Tumin: Why?

Rosenberg: Because of developments in both the Endowments relating to politics. I'm speaking of the powerful ideology of anti-elitism that's now being taken up in Washington and which is, culturally speaking, an equivalent of Stalinism. The attack on elitism is simply a disguised form of anti-intellectualism, and opens the door to every politician who wants to lay hands on money and jobs for his friends. Now, that's dangerous, because the art world today is financially very dependent on government money and on corporate money. And when you begin to study concretely the influence that is generated by those two forms of sponsorship, you have a lot to be alarmed about, because of their natural interests in regard to art.

Tumin: What about the WPA art program?

Rosenberg: The one thing that was good about the WPA was its lavishness; the fact that it had no criteria. This I know will startle you, and make you uneasy. Anbody that came along and said he was an artist, they put him on. One artist got to be a little better, someone else got worse; maybe the latter wasn't an artist at all. It didn't matter—so long as there were no criteria, the full weight of bureaucracy could not be applied to any individual.

Tumin: Earlier we were talking about the possibilities of what are the best situations for training young people in art, and you were deploring the state of the universities, and you were saying you don't know of a single good university art school now, even though you used to believe that a young person should be trained both in art and

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ideas, since they are very important together, but that nobody's doing it right now.

Rosenberg: Yes, and I started to say that someone else I know, a professional art educator, shares the same view.

Tumin: Why?

Rosenberg: Because, he said, when he started his art department, they found *artists* whom they brought into the university and they produced a generation of MFAs. The next thing was they got rid of the visiting artists, and they hired the MFAs, so the second generation was taught by MFAs. The first generation of MFAs had been taught by artists. But the second generation of MFAs was taught by MFAs. So the standards kept going down. That is, I think, a description of what has ruined teaching in our art departments, the requirement of administrations for degree-holding faculty. By this time nobody hires an artist any more, and they have established the kind of approach to art which comes out of a university, not out of artists' studios.

Tumin: In that same regard, would you be willing to say, in general, that critics serve art well, or serve it poorly, or we'd be better off without most of them? What's your sense of the impact of criticism on art?

Rosenberg: Criticism today is also coming out of the universities to a very great degree. If you look at the art magazines, you will see that they are filled with young people who have gotten MFAs and who are dying to get some recognition, and their approach is the same as the approach of the MFA artists.

Tumin: Including that of the critics of the leading papers and the leading magazines?

Rosenberg: Well, there are no leading papers and magazines. What are you talking about?

Tumin: The New York Times.

Rosenberg: The New York Times we don't have to discuss. *The New York Times* has a cultural program, and the people who write for *The New York Times* are about as apt for that program as can be imagined. It's all summed up in the title of the Sunday *Times* cultural section: "Arts and Leisure." You wouldn't want to bother people with serious ideas when they're enjoying that leisure, would you?

Tumin: Should anyone pay any attention to what artists themselves say about art?

Rosenberg: Oh, absolutely. But you have to know how to pay attention.

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Tumin: How? Give us some clues.

Rosenberg: Well, that is to say, often they're not telling the truth, they're trying to delude you. Nevertheless they say things that are of utmost importance.

Tumin: Can you know without eating dinner with them 200 times how to interpret them?

Rosenberg: Yes, you can tell by looking at what they do and comparing it with what they say. Between the two, I'd anytime take a lying artist . . .

Tumin: To a truth-telling critic?

Rosenberg: To a truth-telling critic, sure.

Tumin: At least the artist's lies are of interest in the total body of art?

Rosenberg: Sure.

Tumin: Are you of the same mind with regard to literary criticism?

Rosenberg: Literary criticism is a totally different matter.

Tumin: You think it's much more responsible and important?

Rosenberg: It's an ancient activity and it comes out of people reading books and studying literature. Most reviewers, of course, have no talent, but so much of it goes on that some people were bound to do something worthwhile. There are plenty of fairly decent literary critics.

Tumin: I take it you also don't count the museums of today, including the Museum of Modern Art, as any great assets in the production of interesting things in the world of art.

Rosenberg: You mean in terms of their writing?

Tumin: No, in terms of what they hang. In terms of the kind of relationship to the art world that they promote.

Rosenberg: Their record has been very bad in the last twenty years. The great thing, as far as art in the museum is concerned, was the Museum of Modern Art in the thirties, when its function was very clear. That was to enlighten the savages in North America about what was going on in Europe. They did a wonderful job, and they had the best collection of modern art in the world. And without the Museum of Modern Art there would not have been any great developments in American painting and sculpture. That goes without saying.

Tumin: Wait a minute. You mean a whole group of European painters who came over would not have been able to be shown, would not have hit a market?

Rosenberg: No. They weren't known.

Tumin: Would they have died unattended to, you think?

Rosenberg: Whether they would have died unattended to or not, they

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would not have been part of the experience of American painters. That's the important thing. I mean, there were a few painters who knew Mondrian, but Mondrian when he died was an unknown person. In the thirties I went to the first exhibition in the U.S. of Paul Klee. The most expensive painting in the show was $600. Nobody knew Paul Klee. Most of the artists had never heard of Paul Klee. Even Picasso was hardly known in America. The Museum of Modern Art did a tremendous educational job. But it went off the track when the Americans began to produce advanced art. Alfred Barr didn't know what was going on. I suspect that he couldn't stand the Abstract Expressionists. The fact of the matter is, the Museum of Modern Art, like the Metropolitan, failed to buy Pollock or de Kooning, and had to pay huge sums for them later on.

Tumin: Was it possible to say at that time, do you think, "Damn it, this man is an important painter. Buy him."

Rosenberg: Some people said that.

Tumin: Would it have been possible for you? Would that be the kind of judgment you would have been willing to make, and could have made at that time?

Rosenberg: I never added, "Buy him."

Tumin: Leave "buy" aside. This man is an important artist.

Rosenberg: Yes.

Tumin: You could tell thirty years ago that Jackson Pollock was an important artist?

Rosenberg: Sure, that wasn't difficult. Of course, the point was also that we were all friends. It didn't take any great genius to say that this friend of mine is a great artist. As a matter of fact, I can document this. At the end of the war, I wrote a piece about art for the one-volume guide that came out of the American Guide Series, of which I had been the art editor in the thirties. In the article I mentioned a list of artists of the previous generation. The editor of the book told me the publisher wanted me to mention contemporaries. I replied that you couldn't mention contemporaries because to mention five artists, meant leaving out fifty. Mentioning ten meant leaving out a hundred. The editor insisted that the publisher wanted names. I said, "All right, I'm going to put in the names of my friends." He said, "Go right ahead. I don't care if you put in your grandmother." So I put in my friends. In that book, published in the forties, you will find that the great artists are Gorky, de Kooning, Pollock and so on.

Tumin: One last set of questions, and then we'll fold up. It's com-

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monly said, for better or for worse, that the great problem of many painters today is that no one knows what to paint about. You recognize that statement, of course.

Rosenberg: Yes.

Tumin: What's your response to that statement?

Rosenberg: I agree with it. Barney Newman kept saying over and over again that the important thing for the artist today is *what* to paint. To pick one's subject, that's the important thing.

Tumin: No, I don't mean that. I mean that they don't know what to paint. Not that that isn't the important question always for an artist. But people characterize this period as being one in which all previous things to paint about have been exhausted.

Rosenberg: They said that in the forties and that's why Barney made that his slogan.

Tumin: But do you think that's so, that all previous things have been exhausted and that painters don't know what to paint about? Not that it isn't important for them to care about what to paint about, but that they don't know what to paint about?

Rosenberg: They never knew. An artist has to decide this question.

Tumin: So this is not a special dilemma of the artist today. It's no more poignant, nor more pressing today than ever before.

Rosenberg: Well, in the thirties the question was, "Is the artist supposed to paint the class struggle?" Then somebody said, "No, you're not supposed to paint the class struggle, you're supposed to paint the wheat fields of Idaho." Then somebody else said, "No, you're supposed to paint legends of America, like Benton." This has always been the question. When you decide that question, you decide all the other questions that go with it.

Tumin: So the painter of today is in no worse situation with regard to that than ever before.

Rosenberg: No. It has always been a great mystery of modern times as to what to paint. The modern world broke the academic certainty about what to paint. Choosing the subject became a kind of definition of the modern. The modern is that you paint reality, whatever that means. Every new movement has come up as a new form of realism. All movements, including the Bauhaus, always say, Realism. What is realism? What's to paint? What's important?

Tumin: So, if I were going to sum up, I would say that, leaving aside those virtues of the periods of homogeneity of culture, and primitive cultures of which you've talked, that, in some sense, the situation of

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painting today is probably as good as it's ever been in that there's much more freedom and individualism than ever before, however much there is pressure toward conformity.

Rosenberg: Now wait a minute. I didn't say that was a virtue. I said that's our predicament.

Tumin: A predicament, but also a virtue because you think artists ought to be free to paint.

Rosenberg: No, I don't think they *ought* to be free to paint. I think they have to be, not that they ought to be. They can't paint if they're not free.

Tumin: Well, then they have to be free to paint, which is another way of saying they ought to be free. So they have to be free to paint and they are more free than they've ever been before.

Rosenberg: I don't know if they're more free than ever before. Let's say, more people have access to art. You raised the question that maybe it'd be better if a lot of them stopped doing it.

Tumin: More have access to art. More have access to the resources required to engage in art. There are more museums and galleries than ever before. There is more of a public than ever before. They're more free to decide what to paint about.

Rosenberg: Everything is hunky-dory, except . . .

Tumin: Except what?

Rosenberg: Except nobody has good ideas.

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STORIES

Daniel Asa Rose

THE GOODBYE PRESENT

1. How did Roy's wife react when Roy said: "This? This here's an elk tree," and slapped the bark authoritatively?

Roy's wife did not say a word or change her expression. But she felt victorious. Rita invariably felt victorious when her husband faltered, or made a mistake, or made a fool of himself. She was always prepared for victory of this type, and so she wore an expression of patient, queenly sufferance whenever she listened to him. Behind this frozen expression she waited passionately for her husband to stumble. Even if he were telling a funny story which happened to amuse her, Rita would project the pleasant, bored air of having endured the story a hundred times before. It was as if she were saying to everyone else: "You think he's charming, but put up with it as long as I have. . . ." And then when he made a mistake she'd be proven right—all she had to do was hold the expression, it was proof.

2. Surely this was not a funny story he was telling?

Correct. He was answering a question about a tree's identity.

3. In what way was his answer a mistake?

There is no such thing as an elk tree. There are elms and there are oaks.

4. Did Rita always feel better after this sort of victory?

Always. Rita was not a ham like her husband, so this was how she competed: counting minutes before he stumbled, waiting, waiting; and gloating sweetly once he did. Hearing him say "elk tree" was particularly gratifying. Silently, and without batting an eyelash, she cherished the moment he said it, and wished deeply that the moment would freeze, that everyone

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could stay as they were for eternity; she would love them all then, even Roy. Please freeze!

5. *Did God answer her prayer?*

There is no God. Rita was just a bad winner.

6. *Was she born that way?*

She was not born that way. She was not even married that way. Rita began to exult in each of her husband's mistakes, and secretly to rejoice every time something unfortunate happened to them as a couple, only when it became evident they were getting more than their share of bad luck. Her early hysterectomy. Adopted son turning out poorly. Roy's career as a songwriter washed up prematurely. All this would have been spooky had Rita allowed herself to be surprised each time. Instead she grew to accept misfortune, to anticipate and to welcome it.

7. *She was bitter?*

Not in the ordinary sense. She specialized in misfortune and derived satisfaction from it. There is a popular expression for this strategy.

8. *If you can't lick 'em, join 'em?*

Precisely. She joined 'em with glee. It was almost a game, it became her way of winning. It was like those card games where certain cards were bad, they counted against you . . . unless you got all of them. Then they were very valuable.

9. *Then Rita was ugly as a witch?*

On the contrary. She was bewitchingly beautiful. The more bad things she collected—husband mistakes, family tragedies, and so on—the more beautiful she became. On the day in question she wore a yellow ribbon in her black hair. She glowed with a negative electricity.

10. *What kind of day was it?*

The second day of the hottest weekend in years. The day before, Saturday, had been so bad that factories and offices up and down the Eastern seaboard were forced to close, suburban families to spend the weekend sitting in glacial shopping malls. Saturday night was even worse because of a black-out in New York City. All night thousands of half-delirious New Yorkers flocked to the Staten Island ferry for a ride through moving air, and by dawn Sunday mad schemes of escape had been concocted.

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One young couple on Manhattan's Riverside Drive awoke so faint that they hastily made arrangements to show up at Roy's place in Westhampton. As well as to catch an ocean breeze, they came to say goodbye.

11. How did Roy like that?

Roy loved his niece Henrietta; he could do without Henry. He did not like that they were moving the next day to Cambridge, England. He did not like that they were to pursue their doctorates. He thought they were overschooled already. They were. But their appearance in Westhampton was convenient because Roy had a goodbye present for Henrietta.

12. How did they react to Roy's identification of the elk tree?

They were sticky with embarrassment. However they were often and easily embarrassed these days. Partly it was because Henrietta had recently learned that she was carrying their first child; they felt particularly impressionable, as if outside events could not only have an unnatural effect on themselves but could jinx the embryo, as well. Consequently they were often and easily bullied. Just the evening before, for instance, they had been bullied by a (hot and harried) barmaid on Bleeker Street. "Don't you have any food?" asked Henry when no menu had arrived with their second drinks. "How was I supposed to know you wanted to eat?" parried the barmaid effectively, giving them an order form to fill out. "Two spring chickens," Henrietta wrote. They laughed and blushed at the meaning.

"Three spring chickens" would have summed it up, for there was no doubt the progeny of such a gentle couple would be of the same cast: plump, pale, scholastic.

13. How do you know? There's no God. . . .

I'm playing, playing. The progeny tried to kill himself over his first girlfriend nineteen years later. He tried to kill himself over his divorce thirty years later. He let a tour bus strike his wife dead in Picadilly Circus fifty years later. He was brought up British.

14. Is it fun playing?

Eh.

15. Why didn't Henrietta correct her uncle about the elk tree?

She had no right to contradict him. She lost that right when

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she allowed him to love a heightened image of herself, a Henrietta far more merry, adorable, witty and surprising than the one she happened to be. She couldn't help it. Roy made her feel phony when she was most her true self. "I didn't mean it as a pun," she'd protest half-heartedly after he'd misconstrue one of her sentences; Roy would look at her sideways, see no livelier way the sentence could have been intended, think her all the more clever for protesting, and laugh with renewed appreciation. She would acquiesce, but it cost her her rights. If she couldn't stick up for her true self, she had no right to stick up for the rest of reality, including trees. An elk tree was just as real as the Henrietta she allowed to exist.

Henrietta guessed that Roy had heightened images, queenly but disturbed images, of all his women friends. It was his way of flirting with women and ultimately of ruling them. Henrietta always ended up feeling haggard and dull in the shadow of what he supposed her to be.

16. Why didn't Henry correct Roy?

Physical cowardice.

Roy ruled men by sheer might and it was apparent that he would relish an excuse to make mincemeat of Henry. He was always wanting to lock horns with Henry. He would interrupt the younger man, closing in with his colossal chest and saying: "Ah ha! You mean. . ." and twisting what Henry had said. Then he'd ruffle Henry's hair or playfully take a swing at him and the argument would be over. And soon the next argument would begin. Henry sensed that Roy did not keep male friendships very long, that sooner or later he would have to prove himself mightiest, that he'd have to start pushing. He wouldn't be able to stop until he made his friend feel like a fairy.

17. Was Henry losing his hair?

And how. It wasn't to be ruffled.

So if Roy wanted to think there was such a thing as an elk tree, that was alright by Henry.

18. To sum up, Roy's identification of the elm or oak as an elk tree was received in silence?

Wrong! But to see where you made your mistake, it may be useful to rewind our tale to the wee hours of the morning.

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Roy awoke with a familiar but ghastly pain in his chest. Carefully he took himself out of the bedroom, out of the house, and across the dark yard. He slumped in the middle seat of the family station wagon and groaned in privacy for an hour until the sun came up and the pain subsided. Thereupon he walked into the house and put on the kitchen radio softly. When Rita came downstairs he was fixing an omelette with chopped ham, green peas and red pepper. Rita activated the oven fan and removed herself to the living room, where twelve pillows were lying in wait for their Sunday fluffing. She went around the room giving each pillow four wallops, little by little loosening her yellow blouse from her black short-shorts. By her fourth pillow she had worked up a sweat above her lip, and by her sixth pillow she had worked up a rage. Physical activity first thing in the morning, when what she really wanted to do was lounge in bed, could always be counted upon to rouse some rage. She did it to herself deliberately, as if she were two people, one a sleepy-headed camper and the other a bugle-mouthed counselor on a campaign to make life miserable for all spoiled slugabeds. Rise and shine, you pampered bitch! Eight, nine, ten—each pillow was socked harder than the last—and the twelfth was carried furiously into the kitchen. "Will you please wake our darling young son!" she demanded over the racket of the fan.

Roy took the skillet with its bubbling omelette up to Ricky's room. "Oh Ricky boy . . ." he sang to the tune of "Danny Boy," waving the dish, filling the dark, draped bedroom with an adventurous odor, ". . . your parents want you dow-hown stairs." "Ugh," said Ricky. "Oh yes they do . . ." began the father again, ". . . or they will fry your fa-an-ny," humorously touching the skillet to the appointed mound in the blankets. "Leave me alone!" snarled the boy, turning his head to the wall, "I'll be down in a minute." Roy started to leave as there came, from under the pillow, an exclamation like a defiant "Good night!"—but lewd.

His chest seized up and Roy hurried out of the room.

The morning heated; telephone arrangements were made to receive refugees from Riverside Drive; at around eleven the not-quite-sporty Datsun crunched up the driveway with Henrietta at

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the wheel and Henry looking nervous; Bloody Marys and sardine finger-sandwiches were served under the leaves on the patio. "You're turning into a regular boozer," Roy told Henry sarcastically at 11:30. "It's quite spicy," gasped Henry. At 11:45 Henrietta commented favorably on the patio's absence of mosquitoes. "That may be true," answered Rita, smacking her fingertips, "but there are enough spiders to make up for them." At noon Roy stood up. "Give your baby a good first name," he told his guests sonorously, "and then give it a better middle one." (The statement was not supposed to mean anything, necessarily, it was just supposed to sound sonorous.) Roy and Henrietta left the shade to play horseshoes. The percussive sounds from the sunny, close-cropped lawn continued for half an hour while Rita and Henry made political chit-chat marked by a near perfect shortage of facts and mutually agreeable conclusions. By 12:30 their conversation had turned personal. Rita asked him—clang! a howl and a squeal told her a rematch was to begin—how his doctoral program was set up, if he looked forward to the baby, did he feel sad about leaving the States, why he kept his shirt on in such weather. In reply to the last, Henry lowered his shirt and showed her the painful heat blisters on his shoulders; Rita shuddered, gaped, dared to touch . . . finally her breath trembled so strangely at the sight of the injury that she went inside to make another batch of Bloodys. A leaf floated down onto Henry's head. Rita returned with nail polish on the tray and began to apply it to one hand, then the other. "Roy always lets me win," wailed Henrietta from the horseshoe pit. "Nonsense!" bellowed Roy, reaching the patio suddenly and dropping himself onto his stool, "I let no one win! Ever!" They nibbled and drank. They perspired, all four: Roy steamed, shaking his massive head and sprinkling everyone; Rita seemed cool but, oppressed by her husband's reappearance, occasionally sighed at an oversized drop of sweat that tumbled down from the yellow ribbon at her hairline; Henrietta took Henry's soggy hand in her soggy hand. Peace and balance reigned for a quarter hour until, toward one o'clock, a second leaf landed on Henry's head. Looking up, Henry managed to spill the leaf and to study

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the branch whence it came. "Is this a hickory?" he mused. "This?" said Roy, slapping the bark authoritatively, "this here's an elk tree."

There was no "silence."

Ricky boy had arisen.

Question carefully.

19. What was Ricky wearing?

A purple bathrobe and purple slippers. Black frame glasses over his orange bangs. A scowl. In his position on the upstairs deck he looked like a figurehead on the prow of a haunted ship.

20. Ricky slept until one?

Even at one he was not happy about rising. Experts say this is rare for twelve year old boys, but it was typical of Ricky, who suffered nightmares in the dark and frequently could not get to sleep until two, three, even four a.m. The night before he had stayed up extra late, pacing, reading, and finally passing off at about the time Roy was getting up.

21. Reading?

Monster paperbacks. And drawing monster pictures, gluing monster models, chewing monster bubblegum. It was Ricky's way of working out his nightmares. During the day he didn't have to be so quiet and was able to create imaginative monster sounds on his father's quadriphonic tape recorder. Remember that Roy was a songwriter and you will see what a distortion, what an affront, Roy considered this last practice to be.

22. Sounds like little Ricky needed help, yes?

But where was he to get it? He was pretty certain his parents were monsters, and he was convinced, after one session, that the school psychologist was one of them too—else how could the guy know so much about them? Ricky protected his secrets from these dissemblers. If they asked about his preoccupation, he'd explain that he loved monsters, that monsters were his friends—a sensible lie, one curries favor where one can. If they asked him to name his favorite color, he'd say lime green, his least favorite. If they asked him to make his bed, he'd tuck the quilt in crossways. Ricky was safer when he kept others off balance in these ways but he blanched if they managed to throw him off

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balance. His world was perilous enough without people playing games, tampering with words, merging concepts, and saying things like "elk tree." Thus his scowling appearance on the upstairs deck, thus his pronouncement that his father was an "old drunk."

23. That's what happened?

Excuse me?

24. That's what happened when Roy identified the tree?

Yes.

"You old drunk!" said Ricky.

Rita looked up from her nail polish and turned to the two guests to reveal her wondrously mild expression: "Isn't this pleasant," it seemed to say, "wouldn't it be excellent to hear this day in and day out, as I do?"

Henrietta squeezed Henry's hand.

Roy said: "What. Did. You. Say?"

"You heard me," said Ricky, tittering a bit with excitement.

"WHAT?"

"An elk tree," said Ricky derisively, trying to expand the dialogue.

"Did you call me what I think you did?" asked Roy.

Ricky got the upper hand. "Probably," he said. "Hi Cousin Henrietta, hi Cousin Henry."

The cousins looked to Rita for directions on how to reply. Her face was wondrously mild and blank. "G'morning," they said.

"It's not morning," thundered Roy, "it's one o'clock in the afternoon. That's what time this big man gets up to take his breakfast!"

"Did you have a nice ride out here, Cousin Henry?" asked Ricky.

"Leave them out of it!"

Ricky's expression slowly changed from one of concern to one of grief. "I'm just trying to talk to my 'relatives,'" he told his father mournfully. "Goodbye Henry and Henrietta," he said, turning to shuffle into the house.

"Ricky!" said Roy. "I would like an apology this minute."

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"Don't you even want me to get dressed?" cried Ricky, vexed at every turn.

"I'm only going to say it two more times," warned Roy quietly.

"Alright, I'm going," Ricky sighed.

"Apologize."

Ricky opened the door to the house.

"Apologize!" Roy burst to his feet.

Ricky let go of the door and watched it pump shut. With his head down and his hands in the pockets of his bathrobe, he shuffled back to his podium. "I'm sorry I told everyone that you were an old drunk, Daddy," he sniffed.

But that's what his daddy was turning into.

25. Roy was turning into an old drunk?

So I have said.

With all due respect I must warn you not to waste questions.

26. Don't I get as many questions as I like?

This may come as a surprise. You get fifty questions altogether. Theoretically, we could go on and on, but fifty should give you an ample chance to get the complete story provided you don't waste any more of them.

27. How did I know to ask the first question about something called an elk tree and someone named Roy?

That question was given to you free, compliments of the house. Since then you've been on your own—and done magnificently.

28. Was the way in which Roy and Rita met prophetic?

The way every husband and wife meet is prophetic.

Roy and Rita met through a fun-loving, warm-hearted anatomy professor named Professor Abel. Roy took Professor Abel's introductory course as a requirement for freshmen. It met at eight a.m. One day Roy came to class with a hangover. Professor Abel asked Roy to stand and to recite all the bones in a human being's lower body. Roy included the penis. The professor thought this was hilarious and he went out of his way to befriend Roy. Six years later Rita, a coed without a hangover, made the same error. The professor couldn't get over it. He

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traced Roy through the alumni office and urged his two pupils to meet. Being young they were good sports about it. They met, they laughed at how outlandish it was, they laughed some more, they romanced, they eloped and moved to Hollywood where Roy was beginning a decade of prominence in the music field.

29. Did this beginning portend of things happy or sad?

Sad. The fact that the penis is boneless was crucial to the decay of their relationship.

30. Are you saying Roy became impotent?

Let's say he did not feel good about himself once his songs began to dry up. Rita became more beautiful every year, like a flame that blazes most brightly on its last bit of fuel, if you will.

31. Whom did long-time friends consider to be at fault in the marriage, Roy or Rita?

Nearly everyone believed that Rita was emerging as the good soul in the marriage, that Roy—with his drinking, his bad-natured outbursts, his overly large mannerisms—was showing his true colors. Even people who liked Roy best were surprising themselves by coming to this conclusion.

One of the only persons to know better was the anatomy professor. He was no longer a "friend" because Roy had taken offense at something or other long ago, but from what reports he could get the good professor surmised that Rita was the villain. In his view Rita took Roy's penis-bone, she took his backbone, she took his ribs—she filleted him. And all because life wasn't working out perfectly, beginning with the hysterectomy and then the other setbacks, and she had to make bad worse. She wanted a clean sweep of badness. The professor thought Rita to be a powerful and dangerous woman. He was correct. The wondrous mildness she displayed in times of stress, the inner calm, the patience, was not that of someone who was bearing up under terrible odds, but of a sated despoiler. She had collected nearly all the bad cards and now she could afford to relax.

32. What did Roy do after Ricky apologized?

He muttered "Ricky, Ricky, Ricky," and then he addressed his pregnant niece and said: "It's still worth it—with all the heartache, and with all the . . . crap! . . . it's still worth it," and

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then to Henry: "You remember that," and then looking up at the tree he hummed the melody of "Try To Remember," and then he faced Rita with new energy and sang: "Try to remember that this, is an elk tree, it is, just that, because, I—say—so," and then he switched to bourbon. This entailed his walking into the house.

33. Did anything transpire in his absence?

You bet. While Roy was getting the bourbon Rita quietly told the two youngsters that Roy had lung cancer.

They said: "What!" and Henrietta added: "Can anything be done?"

"Since he found out about it he refuses to see any doctors," Rita said, screwing closed the sky-scraper cap of the nail polish with fingers that needed to dry. She was plainly wearied of the way Roy handled real-life situations. "Your uncle thinks that would be giving in to it, you see."

The door opened and Ricky, who knew nothing of this matter, approached with the bourbon tray. He still wore his bathrobe and slippers. Rita said: "Oh, I thought you were your father."

"No," said Ricky, "my father's on the potty." As he leaned to set down the tray he grunted emphatically, by way of rounding out the picture.

"So that's the latest," Rita concluded, taking a sip from Roy's glass.

"I can't believe it," said Henrietta.

"Neither can I," said Henry.

"Why not?" interrupted Ricky. "Everybody's got to go sometime. Sometimes when he has to go number one he does it right out here."

Rita sputtered into her husband's drink, a short laugh. "That's disgusting," she said lightly, wiping the side of the glass and relegating it to the arm of Roy's chair.

"I just think it's horrible," reaffirmed Henrietta.

"Same here," said Henry. "Cut it out," he told Ricky, who had taken a seat at his feet and was harmlessly tossing patio pebbles up onto his lap.

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"No, but this is really, really horrible," said Henrietta. "Do you think," she asked Rita, "I could be of any help if I talked to him?"

"He'll most likely tell you it's nothing, a virus," she answered. "An elk virus."

"I know what you mean," interrupted Ricky. They turned to him with alarm. "He's crazy. He really thinks this is an elk tree, just because he wants it to be. Somebody," he said, tossing up three larger pebbles, "should really call his bluff sometime."

The grown-ups thought about that for a couple of minutes. Finally Rita said: "Oh go away Ricky."

34. What was taking Roy so long?

Sad to report, Roy was feeling sorry for himself on the john. It began when he noticed the guest towels beside him, lovely towels with blue and brown Peruvian designs. He recalled that he had bought them for Rita long ago in Hollywood. In the store the towels had been stiff and coarse, but Roy figured they would soften with a few washings. It had seemed to him that the towels were too expensive to remain stiff and impractical. Young, newly rich, in love, the songwriter believed money was like that: it would automatically buy you things that were both lovely to look at and practical, too. But the towels never softened. They remained completely useless, scratchy. Roy's life seemed to him a folly.

Roy drew three sheets of toilet paper from the spool. He held the first one, the furthest one, in his hand.

"Damn it already, Ricky!" he heard. It was Henry yelling. Henry had jumped up and brushed the pebbles from his lap onto Ricky's face. "Enough already!"

Roy pulled on the furthest sheet. It ripped inadequately. Instead of getting all three sheets, he only got part of one. A sob of outrage, at things both great and small, came out of Roy. Immediately he snapped back, he regained control—but this was a very frustrated man.

35. Isn't it unusual for a successful man to act like that?

I'm afraid not very. You should have seen him earlier in the middle seat of the station wagon.

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36. Was Roy now a better gift-buyer than he had been in Hollywood?

Not in Henrietta's view. All the gifts she had ever received from Roy, from the shocking Arabic perfume he gave her in first grade, to the Danish handmirror of last Christmas, were inappropriate; they managed to make Henrietta feel insufficient. The handmirror was royal but Henrietta was not; it was a fantasy she could not live up to. The sight of her chubby, unproud face reflected in the Danish oval, framed by silver swan figurines, revolted Henrietta, it made her feel homely by contrast, a fat duck. She felt odd when she used it, as if she were part of a frightening fairy tale—worshipped by a blind suitor or captured by a 200 year old prince.

Actually it was Roy who had captured her. He had forced the gift upon her, as he forced all his gifts, and she hadn't had the nerve to reject it. She couldn't bring herself to say: "Here, take it back. You've got me all wrong. I don't like seeing myself this way." Dutifully she took the mirror and dutifully she kept it on her dresser. And every time she looked in it she was his prisoner, she was his princess, as surely as if he had molded a silver crown around her head.

37. Did Roy ever buy things for himself?

From time to time. He didn't scrimp on himself except when important matters were at stake, such as his health.

38. Why wouldn't Roy see a doctor for his cancer?

A. He preferred to think of it not as cancer but as a cigarette pain. He had quit smoking already; what more could a doctor prescribe?

B. He had a superstitition that he'd be a goner if he underwent an operation. He knew it was irrational but he feared that the open air would "stimulate" the cancer.

39. Two excuses?

But of course. Every bad move Roy made was supported by at least two excuses so that if something should happen to one, he would be held steady to his error by the other. He refrained from locking the bathroom door, for instance, on the grounds that: (A) he might find himself lacking some item and have to

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call out for it, and (B—in which he was very much a child of his time) he considered locking the bathroom door a sign of paranoia.

40. In what way was this a bad move?

People generally do not like their niece's husbands to surprise them in the bathroom.

41. Was Henry embarrassed about barging in?

"Oops, sorry!" he exclaimed. "I just came in to wash my face! It's so humid! Boy! I'll let you finish!"

"That would be good of you, Henry," said Roy.

Naturally he was embarrassed, but worse was to come a minute later when Roy passed him in the kitchen. "Sorry about that," he said, rinsing his face with a moist paper napkin.

"About what?" said Roy, "I've already forgotten it." He began to pour himself a scotch.

"Oh I think," ventured Henry, dabbing around his neck, "I think your bourbon is waiting for you on the patio."

"Lucky me," said Roy. "Well, I guess I can handle the both of them."

"'Lucky Me,'" repeated eager, wire-brained Henry. "Wasn't that the name of your first hit song?"

Roy was well pleased. But he looked as if he were going to hit Henry.

"You big boozer," he said threateningly, putting down the drink. "You little rummy. Since when do you know about my past, you lush? Think you caught me being sentimental, making private jokes?" He came towards Henry with the wide, circling arms of a performing wrestler. "You have not lived until you have been in one of my famous four-hour headlocks."

"Wait wait," gabbled Henry, uttering a laugh. "Ow, ow," he yelped just before Roy grabbed him by the neck and the waist and bent him like a fluffy pipe cleaner. "My blisters!"

Gently, manfully, Roy turned his advantage into a paternal hug. With one hand he buried Henry's head in his big shoulder, patting and rubbing. "I'd never hurt you," he told Henry in a voice thick with emotion, "you know I'd never hurt you. Henry," he said, rocking them both, "you're a good man, Henry. You're going to be a good father. And Henrietta," he inhaled

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sharply, "she's going to be a wonderful mother . . . loving and kind and . . . beautiful as a queen. I want you to believe that. You believe that, don't you, Henry?"

"Sure," came the muffled, mortified voice of Henry, who was quickly formulating a cancer superstition of his own, namely, that cancer might be contagious at certain proximities.

Embarrassed? Yes, but Henry was used to that; far worse was feeling infected.

42. How did Henry deal with this new feeling?

By proceeding, directly upon his return to the patio, to get smashed.

43. Did this help?

It might have helped had Henry chosen an appropriate chair from which to do it, but he mistakenly chose a low-slung canvas chair situated below the level of the table. Henry was too inexperienced a drinker to know the connection between posture and mood, so he sprawled, he stewed, he half-snoozed as the heat collected, as the chatter peaked and peaked again, as Ricky ate monster bubble gum at his ear. Cheese muffins were passed down to him. Brown apple slices were passed down to him. Conversation strayed into his space and was trapped. Henrietta offered to spray his feet with a hose; Henry waved off the treat; she sprayed elsewhere. Ricky created a ghoulishly green bubble nearby. Suddenly Henry took one drop past his limit. The stupor clutched him before he'd even had time to set his glass back down on the pebbles. The bubble grew closer, paler, larger; it filled his vision. Rita was enveloped; the elk tree squeezed in; Roy entered laughing, telling a serious Henrietta: "Not to worry about me, not to worry." Henry saw with dismay that the not-quite-sporty Datsun parked beyond the patio had also been swallowed up; it looked not-quite-capable of driving him out and away. For one long second Henry believed he was sitting in a cold tub, at his home on Riverside Drive . . . sweating, he came to and pinpointed the handkerchief in his breast pocket.

"Are you alright?" asked the black and yellow lady.

"He looks unsocial," advised the purple boy.

"Henry," panted the wife.

Roy had an idea. "Alright, everyone give him room," he

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instructed. "Henry, just relax and breathe normally. Ricky," he said evenly, "get that out of his face."

"It's just a bubble," explained Ricky. Nevertheless, it withdrew.

"Is he going to be alright?" Henrietta asked.

Roy chuckled. There was a wet, echoing chuckle from Henry.

The relief was too fast for Rita. She stared out to the horseshoe pit, then blinked back to her fingernails. "I must be quite a hostess," she sighed.

There was the sound of an airplane, invisible.

Roy stood Henry on his feet and proceeded to walk him around the premises. They stopped briefly at the bird bath, where Henry consented to douse his head, they spent a few minutes at the tomato patch, and then continued through the back door of the house.

44. Were they going any place in particular?

Roy led Henry to his music den. It looked like the fix-it area of a rich man's radio shop. The thick white broadloom was strewn with tape reels, breakable television components; the shelves were loaded with electronic machinery, tiny screwdrivers . . . and a small cardboard box that Roy took down. It was sealed with masking tape.

45. The goodbye present!

"This here is for Henrietta," he said. "Think you're steady enough to carry it?"

"In a minute," said Henry, lowering himself to the piano bench.

"I was going to scrub it with ammonia, but I decided that was the husband's job," Roy said. "It'll be priceless when you get the crime out."

"The what?"

"The cobwebs and grime," said Roy. "Whatever."

Henry struck middle C on the keyboard. "I feel somewhat better," he said.

Roy supported Henry by the elbow back to the patio. As they approached he whispered: "It's from one of Westhampton's

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great big mansions. I picked it up at a garage sale. Give it to her with a little build-up, you know?"

Obligingly, Henry placed the box on the table before his wife. "This is from Roy," he said. "It may be a little dirty but it's supposed to be quite valuable."

"Oh Roy," said Henrietta, delicately unpeeling the masking tape. "An antique?"

"Well, kind of," said Roy happily.

"That means junk," warned Ricky.

Before anyone could respond Henrietta pulled out a tall crystal baby bottle. Her heart skidded. She could find nothing to say. One side of the interior was caked with fruity white cocoons. The nipple was cracked and moldy.

"I was just telling Henry that a little ammonia will clean it right up," chirped Roy. "Of course, you might want to replace the nipple. That's easy enough."

"Yes," said Henrietta slowly, "yes."

"You're unfocusing again," Roy told Henry.

There was a sweaty silence . . .

. . . But Rita, for once, was not inclined to cherish it. "Maybe Henrietta wanted to breast-feed, Roy."

Roy didn't like that. "I don't give a damn what she wants to do," he shouted. "She can use it for a juice bottle. Or what if the baby is a biter?" He was angry at his wife. "You've got to have a little imagination, damn it all!"

Henrietta had lost her color. She looked up at Roy.

"That's real crystal," he pointed out. "You'll have to be careful if you want to boil it. Now I know a lot of women like to have all new things for their first baby, and that's fine: I don't mind if you go out and get a hundred new bottles. I just thought it was important for you to have this, too."

"It's from an ancient kingdom," Henrietta breathed.

"There, you see!" crowed Roy. "Someone here's got a head on her shoulders."

Henrietta looked pleadingly at Rita. "But it's horrible!" she said. "It's for a queen that's dead and buried! Can't you tell him that?"

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"What in the hell is going on here?" said Roy. "Everybody's jinxed on account of a few little spiders have gotten in. Give it back if you don't like it. I'll trade it for a couple of art books or something. Jesus Christ, I'm telling you." He looked around for someone to tell.

"Why did you make me carry it out?" stammered Henry.

"Oh shit," said Roy.

"Can I see it?" asked Ricky. Henrietta handed him the bottle.

"Dead, my foot," said Roy. "Who's got a cigarette?"

Ricky put the bottle to the light and studied it with detachment. "Daddy," he said reasonably, "it's second hand."

"Well so are you buddy!"

Ricky continued studying the bottle.

"Forget that," said Roy very quietly. "It didn't mean anything. Please stop," he said. "Everyone stop thinking."

"It was a mistake," said Rita. "It didn't mean anything."

"That's right," Roy said. "People say things that are stupid and cruel and meaningless sometimes. And I'm no exception."

"It's alright," said Henrietta. "Sometimes things pop out of my mouth that don't mean anything. It happens to everybody."

"Silly, dumb things," said Roy. "The trouble is that people don't think before they speak."

"It's nothing to remember," said Henry. "It's easily forgotten."

"I think so, too," said Roy. "We'll forget it here and now. No need to spoil the afternoon. Whom can I help with another drink? Rita, some bourbon? Ricky," he said, turning to his son for the first time, "can I get you a glass of something?"

Thoughtfully Rick smashed the bottle down so that the crystal shards flew up and about like a shower of ice in the sunlight, turning red and blue and green. No one moved. No one spoke.

The end.

46. *The end?*

The end.

47. *They just sat there, frozen?*

Frozen. Some more than others.

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48. Did time stand still?

Yes. No. It seemed to, but slowly, gracefully, it reasserted itself. The afternoon had nearly passed.

49. And Henry and Henrietta?

After a while they began to talk about going. The heat was breaking up. The sun was going down. Still they sat amid the bits of broken crystal. The sunset was seen through the leaves of the elk tree. You might think the sunset after that infernal weekend was ghoulish, green, like a monster bubble. But it was radiant, pink. . . .

It was their last sunset in the States. Next day they would leave for England forever.

50. The sky radiant, ablaze with death, with new life, a hex broken, a baby on its way, arrival and departure! Isn't the world rich?

The farewells took place in semi-darkness. Rick did not trouble to come out of his father's den where he was engrossed in watching baseball on his father's large, and rather loud, television. Rita and Roy quietly walked their guests to the car. There was much solemn hugging, kissing and waving. A mile down the road Henrietta discovered she had left her purse behind. They drove back to the house and Henrietta walked inside. No one was around. She located her purse. She stood around a moment and then called: "Goodbye again!" Roy came out of the den with a drink in his hand and a finger to his lips. "Shh," he said, "Rita's taking a rest." Then he hugged Henrietta once more, saying: "It'll be good. Don't worry. Even after everything. . . ." Quietly he walked her to the front door and pressed their foreheads together under the lamplight. His eyes welled up. "I wish the world were dead," he told her.

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POEMS

Two Poems by Lloyd Schwartz

THE WANDERER

I'm talking about what isn't there anymore,
the *past*—"Ultimate Nostalgia"; a dead end.

I had two friends. Married. I thought they were
my best friends—the both of them; for five,
six years.
And I don't know, they didn't call
me, I didn't call them. . . . It's been since February—
over three months. I can't even tell them
I'm leaving; what's the use?
Maybe I'll
write to them. Maybe I'll call them
when I come back,—*if* I come back.
I'm starting
to get too attached to city life anyway.
It's no good to be dependent on anything—
even a city. . . .
"Constructive Nihilism."

—I think I'm getting cynical.
But what happened?
We *liked* each other. Maybe we liked each other
too much; maybe they got scared. . . .
I thought
six years would make us "inseparable." I guess
we didn't know each other as much as we thought.

—Maybe I'm too romantic.
Why else would
I be going out into the woods?
The only thing
I'm going to worry about now is if there's enough

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room in my pack for my books. . . .
You know what
I'm taking? Whitman, Baudelaire, and the
Arabian Nights,—right?
Whitman is for
wandering—or sitting by the ocean,
in my tent, reading "Out of the Cradle
Endlessly Rocking." And every night, one
of the *Arabian Nights*. . . .
Baudelaire is probably
too much; that's the first book I leave behind.

—I'm planning to shed my possessions as I go.
That's *all* I'm planning.
I have three shirts,
four pairs of socks . . . that's one pair too many,
but I suppose you can't throw good clothes away.
Possessions are ridiculous!
It's what I'm
trying to get away from . . .
and even now,
I can't: I've got this *tent*, and this *knife*,
and this fucking *backpack*, where I have to keep
my fucking *underwear*—
there's no escape.

But anything will be better than this city,
which I don't even want to remember;
—which is going to explode any second,
anyway. . . . I don't want to be around to
hear it.
I'm an anarchist,—but I'm
a socialist anarchist: *Socialist*;
Anarchist; *Existentialist*. . . .
It makes sense.
Think about it: existentialism
is what you believe; anarchy is what
you do, right? We're all *alone*, right? And we act
alone.

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But you can still do things for
other people—that's where the socialism
comes in. It makes sense!
But I don't know, I'm
not sure *what* I believe anymore. All I know is
I talk too much;
—and I've got to get away.

I feel nervous about going. I've never done
anything so completely on my own. . . .
I'm nervous
about hitching, too. What if the cops
pick me up with this grass on me? I've heard
of guys being stripped by some sadist cop
who shoves his hand under your balls, or
up your ass, looking for—god knows what—"Illegal
Stimulants."
Maybe I should get rid of
the grass.
But the whole point is to be
in my tent—*mellow*—by the sea, reading
"Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking."
High Noon—any time of the day! A little
loving, a little smoke, some good words. . . .

I believe in loving,
not *love*—"The Golden Chain."
Listen, my mother just left my father
after twenty-eight years, and still lives
in the same apartment house.
Why did she split?
Why bother? They never talked to each other
anyway. None of us ever talked.
I was pretty close with my father, but
we never *said* anything.
I have four
brothers, and they're all a little crazy;
—look at *me*!
It's not a coincidence.
"The Bonds of Matrimony" . . . I hope

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I never have to get married.

—See this?
I can't even remember where I got it.
It's gold. Someone gave it to me. . . .
I guess
I remember. It was a guy who liked me—
he made it. A hippie goldsmith. . . . I liked
him, too.
It couldn't have worked; he wanted
to live with me. . . .
I'm going to give it to my
first future infatuation, the first new girl
I leave: "My darling (what was your name?), this
is for you to remember me by. . . . So long!"
Nothing to lose but my chain!
—One less to carry.

I could write a good poem about that;
or a *novel* . . . MY LIFE & LOVES.
You know that poem,
"They flee from me who sometimes did me seek"?
—Sir Thomas Wyatt. He knew what he was
talking about.
Or maybe *I flee from them.* . . .
Both; it's about the same.
Or Shakespeare: "Farewell,
thou art too dear for my possessing. . ."
They knew.

I don't think a good poem has been written
in a hundred years.
What the hell do I care
about some broad's period? or some guy's
fucking hard-on? All these fucking ego trips
and masturbation fantasies.
Or else
anemic iambic pentameter academic
exercises. No one—NO ONE—writes
about important things anymore.

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Rimbaud
did, Whitman did. Where's the Socialist-
Anarchist-Existentialist *POET*?

—I'm working on it; but I'm not there yet.

I've been writing a lot. . . .
I always write things down;
I write *everything* down: look at these notebooks.
I kept a diary for about three years. . . .
I'm
trying to talk myself into leaving it.
There's no room;—why should I take it with me?
I keep re-reading it, to see if I can
find out where things went wrong: it doesn't help.

I hate my poems. They sound phony; and they
don't make sense.
I know what I want to say—
but it never comes out right; the words all
get stuck somewhere in my head.
I know they're
in there; why is it so hard to find
the right ones?
That's another reason to
keep moving. . . . I'm bound to learn *something*.

I should call a couple of people before I leave.
A girl I worked with, a guy I met in a bar
a few months ago—we were pretty friendly;
smoked a lot. . . .
I hate goodbyes. That's one
of the problems about leaving—they're too
easy to say; you find out how little
you feel.
I think I won't.
Right now
I feel like I'm not anywhere . . . except
still maybe a little too close to home.

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ON THE RECENT DEATHS OF HIS FRIEND COLONNA AND HIS LADY LAURA

(from Petrarch)

Broken. The high column. The green laurel.
The shade in which my tired thoughts
could rest.
I have lost what is, to retrieve,
hopeless; no matter where I look—no wind
can reach them, no ocean touch them.

You have taken away both my treasures,
Death. They made my life easy, my step high.
To restore them?
Not earth or empire, not jewels, not even
money itself.

But since destiny has consented, what is left
if not to have a sad soul?
to be constantly
on the edge of tears; head bent down.

Is this our life?
It seems so lovely. But how easily we lose
in one morning, what took so many years to get
and such great pain.

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Marjorie Welish

CAREERS

How long we sit in front of them.
Compared with experience, this is gentle.
As if we are going on a long, persistent cruise
to be worn down.

My nephew thinks a fireman is a person
who starts fires. Wonderful.
Then a waterman is someone putting them out.
One composition goes like this:
"The fireman is someone who starts the barbecue.
Arriving with his lighter fluid
he is cheered by everyone, including mothers and fathers.
Then his face grows serious.
He goes over and ignites the grill."

The hardwood in the fireplace is insurmountable.
The first blaze of newspaper shrivels.
We begin again, using spurs and branches
to trap the fire, and then we try a jack
and a stirrup made from our hands,
filling a blue book with wild guesses.
Meanwhile someone comes forward to study the principle.

"It was not, of course, human."
The fireplace, like a "low, pinched braincase"
stared into the room, a container with no memory
of body heat and no feeling for it.
When building a house people embedded a skull in its center;
for centuries they warmed themselves by this contradiction.
With even points like a violin phrase repeated
and ignited over and over for a half hour,
each attack vigilant—the combustion
is what makes the piece, while the most uneven theme
is our attention, which tends to back away,
succumbing to middle distance, asking what else there is,
yet returning. Looking into it, even looking for it.

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Toying with pastimes, and in relation to them, our masterful
size.
The adult games self-contained
in a plastic cube are attractive.
The wave, for instance, a section of which
in a case, tilts, the blue tinted water
crashing one side, then leveling off
before piling and mechanically crashing the other.
The section of anything is interesting.
Another everyone has seen is the shallow oval of sand,
two different weights, two different colors.
The smokiest possible heap
does not deter gravity from sorting it all.
Tableaux from which we draw morals,
the diminution that transforms the ignored
natural occurrence into an object,
thereby a goal. The fire in the fireplace
and the others of the pantheon, the earthquake, the
tidal wave, should in turn while we sit around
play in a recessed place in the walls of our homes.

Sometime during his youth or during the course of an evening
someone shows an aptitude for it and is allowed to preside,
and it becomes his phenomenon. He literally stirs the wind,
the warmed water swelling into a canopy of water,
sending uncatalogued feelings in advance. When a storm develops
on its own, he sits down. "The torrential rains begin."
Stones and rocks strategically gathered
into bulwarks withstand the slicing
rains for quite a while before giving up.
The point is to build something
not so that it lasts forever but that it dies
in the most developed way possible.
That is why he gets up and uses the bellows
to fuel the wind.

Beyond the smiling, seated man, in a sense within
the property left over from his L-shaped pose, there is a fire
"raging" throughout a house, and a company—
presumably No. 7—pulling a hose to it.

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Two Poems by G.S. Sharat Chandra

THE NEW CHURCH

Everything seems right
even the frown on the face
of a passing transcendentalist.

The architect, since demised has sent
word
the steeple is the closest in town
to God's skyway.

Instead of seven as others
the new church has ten marble steps
to the main entrance

& a ramp for those crippled
by acts of men.

The Reverend stands fluttering
like a crystal dove . . .
The Mayor is late.

Rumor has it his chariot was detained
by unknown denominations.

The new church is determined
to set an end to all denominations
by going metric.

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PREPARATIONS

In late August they cross the street
nothing is exchanged between them of the emptiness.
The newspapers pile up everywhere
the moving of the windswept polar caps.
He thought it was a wolf that had peed in the park.
She was busy snipping around the zipper
tracks unlike any event but leading
to openings that reversed on themselves.
She felt the same way about cancer.
The business envelopes once you got used
to their licking felt acknowledged.
So complete is the intensity behind impersonal words,
the clever manipulation of mind over hems.
He thought comings & goings remain
constant like a gardener's hand or General's.
Would it be appropriate to greet one
without reveries on both sides of the Atlantic?
"Ah, now you're picturesque!" she said
pulling the sweater. The bullfinch being
observed looked once in passing,
ah gust! this like any other
a shudder holding its own course.

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Two Poems by Roger Connah

THE OPERA: alfresco

Thankfully I may still have some years
before deciding whether life
—at least
that given to me
I claim little for others of this—

is the last temptation
or just this operatic breath
searching for an audience.

And how you make even those words
words
skip
to their inevitable redundancy

Beautifully put: she would have whispered
Leaning over the balcony of my opera.

THE EXTRATERRITORIAL BEARD

The lights are out
searching for the first signs
of ice, entering Helsinki
from the South
is a winter's journey
an incision
into extraterritorial territory

the bard once said

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Only snowflakes caught white
against the night
are recognizable points of entry
once again

Slow incision
Still takes the patient by surprise
as he steps foot
extraterritorially

The shuddering of ice

You must visit Turku Castle

Home of Swedish extraterritoriality

A bard and
some islands

Is it ice
or just a difficult
a particularly difficult winter thought?

Could it be that people
take the place of time
and occupy us
with a hope in front of our eyes
between a death and a birth

and

hurt each other
to simulate pain.
When
I touched you
time lost its memory
people, their history
the world, its balance, yes again
and
I saw crowds chasing us

they wanted our pain too!

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A. F. Roberts

THE FIFTH SEASON

At this stage, and in my case,
she proves
a tender, voluptuous lover
and my visions fly to flesh
with such an ease
I look and see whole valleys fill with trees
and a fifth season, manifest by birds.
Within our knowledge of so far
we might have quarried out the place of hiding
used by that hermit season, over both our years:
yet at this stage, and in my case,
reason and searching so are waste of hours
seeing slight movement in another room
has power to stop our hearts in time it takes
the time to die to come. Our fortune,
like the present season, has the look
of a white animal crossing swiftly
the path on which we go, the familiar path,
more known to us than we can daily know.

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James C. McCullagh

PRAYER AT THE END OF A TOMB

My epitaph works backwards
at worm-rate
beloved of grass and time.
I visit you late
with the chain of dying women
pressing thumbnail flowers
wish-deep in sand and sin
to gauge against the tale of stone
promises raised in death
the portal hint of the ensign
predictable in primary color
like the sun-certain monstrance
defying the curve of space
within the fear of holy bells
which shatter the truth of atomic bits
with the general noon-day prayer.

The strength of the shamrock shrine
enforces the presence
of the triple-green god
blessed with a motherly gesture,
the female pinions
the arms of desire
caught in the latitude of need,
the blunt lines of a church's prayer
whet the palm talk
raised to ponderous forehead
by silken fingers
rudely harnessed in hate
to the pull of my soul in flight.
The damaged hawk
fed the king's pleasure
and the royal yard I traveled

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under the scrutiny of god
touches the crusade mind
tied to the west
by the womanly cross in a man.

History basks in the late-day light
as I visit you in chains
rolling small stones
like lost promises
through raw fingers
bit by the tendon crawl
of infant moments
carefully watched by earlier oaths
wet in your birth spoon
which like a silver rod
inside your head
weds time's defiance
to the best caress
your love could give me
within the portal shape of man.

When you were dipped in triple green
and chased from mind
to the ensign god
I joined time
for my soul's sake
and wrote my epitaph
at worm-rate
for the stone that waits
the dying women
and their sons
certain that the curve of space
allows a certain father fame
to deny the truth of atomic bits
stone-clear in his heart.

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Elizabeth Dalton

MYSHKIN'S EPILEPSY

In "Dostoevsky and Parricide," Freud argues that Dostoevsky's epilepsy was the central expression of his neurosis, and thus fundamental to his life and character. If this is indeed the case, epilepsy must also have crucial significance for Dostoevsky's work. Throughout most of his adult life, he endured not only the violent and humiliating *grand mal* seizures, which during some periods occurred several times a week, but also the agitated, irritable disorientation that preceded them and the hours and days of weakness and depression that followed. The extraordinary experiences associated with the fits and the state or condition of being an epileptic must certainly have shaped Dostoevsky's work and the conception of experience that informs it in some intimate and profound way.

There are several epileptics in the novels. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the epileptic Smerdyakov is a parricide, the debased alter-ego of Ivan and indeed of all the brothers. In *The Possessed* it is suggested that Kirilov, the tormented and visionary young nihilist who commits suicide, is or might have become epileptic. And above all there is Myshkin, the hero of *The Idiot*. Myshkin is one of the most extraordinary creations in all of fiction. Dostoevsky intended him to be the representation of ideal and absolute moral beauty—"a positively beautiful man," a sort of Russian Christ who would point the way to the moral regeneration of Russia and even the world. And Myshkin is indeed an irresistibly attractive and loveable character—gentle, compassionate, charming—a radiant figure of Christian charity. Yet his charity is strangely flawed, and almost entirely destructive in its effects. Although Myshkin himself is chaste, and indeed apparently impotent, he is drawn compulsively to the brutal passion of Nastasya and Rogozhin. Every life he touches deeply is ruined, and at the end of the novel Myshkin himself sinks into idiocy and stupor.

At the heart of the enigma presented by Myshkin and the novel is epilepsy. It is a terrifying and degrading illness: the seizure is a sudden and total loss of control and even of consciousness. But at the same

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time, epilepsy is the sacred disease of shamans and prophets, who are said to experience ecstasies and visions during the "aura" preceding the fit: thus the seizure can also be seen as a representation of the violent descent of divine power. Much of the extraordinary psychological excitement and aesthetic tension of Dostoevsky's fiction comes from the juxtaposition of the darkest forces in the human soul with radiant images of great spiritual beauty. In *The Idiot* the epileptic seizure itself appears as the violently condensed expression of that intimate, equivocal relationship between the most debased and the most exalted aspects of human experience. The novel also reflects in a pervasive way what might be called the rhythm of epilepsy, the sudden fluctuations of energy and violent alterations of consciousness that characterize the disease. *The Idiot* suggests the importance of epilepsy not only for Dostoevsky's conception of experience, but also for his style, for his narrative and dramatic structure, and especially for that peculiar compulsion towards extreme mental states that gives to the novels their almost unbearable intensity.

The novel was written during a period of great turmoil in the author's life. Dostoevsky had gone to Europe with his pregnant wife under threat of arrest from his creditors; he left Russia, as he wrote his friend Maikov, "to save my health and even my life." Epileptic seizures were recurring once a week: "it was unbearable to be fully *conscious* of the disorder of my nerves and *brain*. I was going mad, that's the truth. I felt it; the disorder of my nerves sometimes drove me to moments of furious madness." He went to Dresden, to Hamburg, and then to Baden, where he suffered an intense recurrence of his gambling mania. Finally his wife managed to get him to Geneva, where, nearly destitute, he began work on *The Idiot*. We know from the notebooks that Dostoevsky had great difficulty in projecting the plot of the novel. And because of his commitment to his editor and his terrible financial plight, each section had to be submitted for publication before the next had been written or even sketched out. In these desperate circumstances, it would seem that Dostoevsky was forced back upon the spontaneous images and rhythms of his mental life to a greater extent than in any other work. It is perhaps because the novel reveals so openly the nature of that life that its author's feelings about it were peculiarly intense. Something about the novel evidently had quite special significance for him. "As for *The Idiot*," he wrote to Maikov, "I'm afraid, I'm so afraid—you can't imagine. A kind of unnatural fear such as I've never felt before." The progress of the novel was intimately linked in Dostoevsky's mind to the course of his epilepsy. As the story

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of the epileptic prince took shape, Dostoevsky's own condition worsened: "the disorder of my nerves has increased and my fits are more frequent and violent." He complained of being in "the most terrible depression. . . . The day before yesterday I had a very serious attack [of epilepsy]. Nevertheless I wrote yesterday, in a state close to madness." The excitement that informs the climactic scenes with their fury and brilliance expressed itself in life in the epileptic seizures, and Dostoevsky reckoned the cost of the great scenes in fits: "I wrote this finale [Nastasya's birthday party] in a state of inspiration, and it cost me two fits in a row." Dostoevsky endowed all of his characters with parts of himself, but it is to Myshkin alone among his principal heroes that he gave the ambiguous gift of his illness. The novel is in an important sense an attempt to understand that illness; it is at some level Dostoevsky's exploration of the meaning of his epilepsy.

One has the sense in reading *The Idiot* that the action of the novel is balanced perilously, that just beyond or beneath its precarious coherence is a kind of maelstrom or abyss in which emotion might lose its connection with intelligible form and manifest itself in some unimaginably direct, "raw" state; here ordinary coherent speech and gesture might give way to frenzy or blankness. And indeed the novel does present us with the image of this extremity in the epileptic fit. In fact, the seizure is a sort of paradigm of the emotional progression of the book's great scenes. In most of these scenes there is a pattern of rising excitement focused upon one central figure whose consciousness becomes more and more strained or exalted, until a moment of unbearable tension, when there is a loss of control, followed by physical and mental collapse.

This is the pattern of the climactic episode at Nastasya's birthday party, when Nastasya throws the hundred thousand rubles into the fire and Ganya faints. It is also the pattern of Ippolit's confession, read in a state of growing delirium culminating in Ippolit's suicide attempt. This sequence appears most clearly in the two episodes that end with Myshkin's epileptic attacks. The last scene of the novel, in which the murderer Rogozhin leads Myshkin to the body of Nastasya, ends with a total loss of control: Rogozhin goes mad, and Myshkin collapses into idiocy and blankness. In lesser forms, the same phenomenon appears throughout the novel, in the constant tendency to uncontrolled behavior and wild emotion.

The novel also shows this "epileptic pattern" in its larger structure: the action seems to progress unevenly, in waves of tension that gather and burst in climactic scenes of spectacular emotional violence,

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leaving the narrative energy of the novel depleted and for a time directionless, until a new wave of tension begins to accumulate. This spasmodic rhythm produces serious structural flaws, gaps and inconsistences in the narrative sequence that threaten the integrity of the entire conception. The first and most obvious break of this kind occurs after Nastasya's birthday party, which ends Part I; the opening of Part II is almost like the beginning of a new novel. The next episode is Myshkin's long day in Petersburg, ending in the climactic scene on the staircase when Rogozhin tries to murder him and Myshkin falls in the seizure. Again, after this scene, there is a sort of break in the narrative, and then a new action begins. The narrative connection from one climactic scene to the next is rather tenuous. *The Idiot* does not have the tightly integrated plot of *Crime and Punishment* or *The Brothers Karamazov*, with their relentless forward motion and evenly calibrated tension, nor the complex intrigue of *The Possessed.* Its dramatic scenes are not strongly connected by the thread of continuous narrative. Each scene, instead of being generated by the preceding one, seems to originate directly in some explosive emotional experience at the center of the novel.

Myshkin's epilepsy appears to be so much a condition of the soul that one almost forgets its connection with the body. Medically, epilepsy remains a complex and little understood disorder—a configuration of symptoms rather than a single clinical entity. The symptoms may come from a number of quite different sources, including a physiological alteration of the central nervous system such as a lesion or chemical imbalance, a psychological cause such as a traumatic incident or hysteria, or some combination of physical and psychological elements. The data on Dostoevsky's illness are hard to decipher. However, even if his epilepsy was based on an organic predisposition, as seems likely, the disease certainly assumed a psychological meaning for him in the context of his experience and personality, as it must for anyone who suffers from such a condition. Indeed, Dostoevsky himself seemed always to conceive of his illness primarily as a psychological and spiritual phenomenon.

Freud argues that Dostoevsky's epilepsy was probably "affective" and hysterical in character. The epileptic reaction, whatever its organic basis, was available for the expression of his neurosis; thus the psychological function of the seizure was to get rid, by somatic means, of masses of stimuli that could not be dealt with psychically. From information about Dostoevsky's life and personality, Freud concludes that in him the Oedipus complex took a particular turn that led to the "negative" resolution, in which the boy abandons his identification

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and rivalry with a forbidding father and adopts instead a passive, "feminine" attitude in the attempt to be loved as a woman and to avoid rivalry and the threat of castration. Paradoxically, however, the woman's sexual role also seems to the boy to imply being castrated; thus the Oedipal hatred of the father is heightened by the fear of being made to play the "feminine" role in relation to him, intensifying parricidal wishes. The guilt associated with such wishes was strengthened disastrously by their fulfillment in reality: the death of the elder Dostoevsky, who was always thought to have been murdered by his serfs, could well have been construed as a kind of parricide. (New evidence described in Joseph Frank's recent biography suggests that the death may have been due to natural causes. However, what is psychologically significant is not what actually happened, but what Dostoevsky believed, and he believed that his father had been murdered.) Freud sees the epileptic attacks as self-punishment: in the seizure the son became temporarily dead, like the murdered father, for whose death he unconsciously held his own guilty desires responsible.

After describing the death significance of the seizures, Freud writes, "What further content they have absorbed, particularly sexual content, escapes conjecture." But in fact a particular erotic content is strongly suggested by the epileptic seizure. A central motif of infantile sexual life associated with the Oedipus complex is the primal scene, the experience or fantasy of observing parental intercourse, which the child often misunderstands as a sadistic punishment of the mother. The epileptic attack—the "little coitus"—with its wild excitement, its loss of control, and its suffering and humiliation, is well suited to serve as the symbolic enactment of such a violent primal scene fantasy.

About Dostoevsky's attacks we can only speculate; we cannot claim to understand the mysterious illness of a man long dead. But about a character in literature we have all the relevant information, for his entire existence is contained in the words of the text. Myshkin has two epileptic seizures in *The Idiot*. The first and more spectacular takes place near the beginning of Part II. Myshkin has spent a long day wandering about Petersburg in a pre-epileptic state of increasing anxiety and disorientation. He goes to visit Rogozhin, the crudely powerful young merchant who is both his rival for Nastasya and his shadowy counterpart, a sort of negative double embodying all the violent and lustful impulses repressed in his own personality. The two men compare their different kinds of love for Nastasya. Myshkin loves her chastely, with compassion, while Rogozhin feels for her mingled lust and hatred. Nonetheless, each man offers to give her up for the other. During this strange conversation, Myshkin finds himself ab-

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sently toying with a knife—the one with which Rogozhin will later murder Nastasya.

Throughout the day Myshkin is tormented by the feeling of a thought pressing for consciousness. His attention is frequently fixed in a peculiar way on bizarre and apparently unrelated impressions, such as the vision of a pair of "strange, glowing eyes"—evidently Rogozhin's—following him intermittently. At Rogozhin's house he notices a shop on the ground floor owned by the Skoptsy, a sect who practice self-castration. In Rogozhin's rooms his attention is captured by a picture—Holbein's painting of the bruised body of the dead Christ. This picture prompts Myshkin to tell a story that for him defines the essence of Russian religious feeling. The story is about two peasants who are preparing to go to bed in an inn, when one is suddenly seized with a desire for the other's silver watch. Praying "God, forgive me for Christ's sake!" he cuts his friend's throat.

After leaving Rogozhin, Myshkin returns to his hotel in a state of growing confusion. Just before the hotel gate, he thinks of Rogozhin's knife. At that moment the thunderstorm which has been building up all day breaks, there is a downpour, and the tension that has accumulated throughout this long hallucinatory sequence comes to a climax. Myshkin sees a man standing in the half-darkness under the arched gateway; he tries to overtake him, but the man vanishes.

> The staircase up which Myshkin ran from the gateway led to the corridors of the first and second floors, on which were the rooms of the hotel. As in all old houses, the staircase was of stone, dark and narrow, and it turned round a thick stone column. On the first half-landing there was a hollow like a niche in the column, not more than half a yard wide and nine inches deep. Yet there was room for a man to stand there. Dark as it was, Myshkin, on reaching the half-landing, at once discovered that a man was hiding in the niche. Myshkin suddenly wanted to pass by without looking to the right. He had taken one step already, but he could not resist turning round.
>
> Those two eyes, *the same two eyes*, met his own. The man hidden in the niche had already moved one step from it. For one second they stood facing one another and almost touching. Suddenly Myshkin seized him by the shoulders and turned him back towards the staircase, nearer to the light; he wanted to see his face more clearly.
>
> Rogozhin's eyes flashed and a smile of fury contorted his face. His right hand was raised and something gleamed in it; Myshkin did not think of checking it. He only remembered that he thought he cried out, "Parfyon, I don't believe it!" Then suddenly something seemed torn asunder before him; his soul was flooded with intense

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> *inner* light. The moment lasted perhaps half a second, yet he clearly and consciously remembered the beginning, the first sound of the fearful scream which broke of itself from his breast and which he could not have checked by any effort. Then his consciousness was instantly extinguished and complete darkness followed.

The confusion and mounting panic of the day, the sensation of a frightful thought hovering at the back of consciousness, the peculiar attention to the eyes, the knife, and the painting of the dead Christ, all gather and burst here in a violent revelation of instinctual fury. In the conversation earlier in the day, Myshkin and Rogozhin have, as it were, verbally passed Nastasya back and forth between them. Myshkin, imagining what Rogozhin will do to her, has said, "I won't hinder you." However, at parting Rogozhin has said, "Take her then . . . I give in to you!" It is as if this strange transaction, in which each man has somehow given the other permission to do as he will with Nastasya, evokes in Myshkin a fantasy of intercourse in which the act takes the peculiar form dictated by certain repressed infantile wishes and fears. At the literal level, of course, the scene "really happens." But at the level of unconscious meaning, the sequence embodies a fantasy of parental intercourse in which the childish wishes to see and to participate are both gratified. The primal scene here takes the sado-masochistic form of a violent attack, in which Myshkin's identification is not with the sadistic father, but with the sadistically violated mother. The intense emotion and hallucinatory vividness are signals of an unusually direct and concentrated expression of the unconscious comparable to that in a dream.

The topographical details of the scene, presented with unusual clarity, suggest familiar symbolic meanings; they are dream language for the body, and for the gratification and punishment of desire. In dreams, gateways and doors often represent the opening of the female genitals: the hotel gateway is a sort of covered arch, and within it is a man. The gateway leads to a staircase, which is dark and narrow, like the ascending passages of the body. Moreover, the stairs wind around a "thick stone column"; the staircase enclosing the column is a strikingly graphic representation of the vagina enclosing the penis. But within this representation is a second one: on the landing is a niche in the column; like the staircase itself, the niche is very narrow, "yet there was room for a man to stand there." This peculiarly detailed topography emphasizes again the apparent smallness of the opening within which there is nonetheless "room for a man to stand"; the emphasis

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seems to express the child's amazement and fascination at the mysterious idea of the hidden space inside the female body, and at the impressive phenomenon of erection.

This sort of repetition is characteristic of the primary process thinking that goes on in dreams and in states of diminished ego control. Just as a single dream image may be the condensation of several unconscious ideas, so a single pressing unconscious thought may be expressed in several images in the manifest dream. However, the repetitions, particularly the last two, also create an effect of ambiguity. That is, the male figure inside the niche, which is in turn inside a column enclosed in a winding staircase, introduces an effect of sexual confusion, corresponding to the child's confusion about what actually happens during intercourse, and about the difference between the male and female genitals.

The confusion is increased by darkness and by the difficulty of seeing anything clearly. It is dark under the gateway, the sky is dark, the stairway is dark: the persistent emphasis on darkness and indistinct vision suggests that this is a scene which takes place at night, and which at once arouses and frustrates the desire to see. The primal scene presents itself primarily as a visual experience, in which the child discovers, by looking, something that has been concealed from him.

> Dark as it was, Myshkin, on reaching the half-landing, at once discovered that a man was hiding in the niche. Myshkin suddenly wanted to pass by without looking to the right. He had taken one step already, but he could not resist turning round.

The wish not to look is clearly a defense against the wish to look, which finally triumphs.

This essentially visual aspect of the primal scene explains the recurring apparition throughout the day of the eyes of Rogozhin. Rogozhin's eyes represent at once the visual aspect of the child's sexual wishes and the threat of discovery as well as the punishment for those wishes, which is castration. When Myshkin looks round, the eyes meet his own, and the man moves towards him until they are almost touching. Myshkin tries to see the other man more clearly; and at this crucial moment, when the wish to see and the wish to touch are both about to be gratified, "Rogozhin's eyes flashed and a smile of fury contorted his face. His right hand was raised and something gleamed in it." The undefined fear that has pursued Myshkin all day suddenly materializes in this terrifying image. This knife that so fascinated him and that will later be used on Nastasya represents at once the instru-

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ment that penetrates, the sadistic penis itself, and the instrument of castration. And castration is the penalty for all the wishes expressed in this scene. It is the punishment for looking at forbidden things and for wishing to replace the father, to compete with him for the mother in an aggressive way: but it is also the price of the wish that emerges most clearly here, the wish to avoid the competition with the father and to submit to him in a passive "feminine" way. Being loved as a woman also seems possible only at the terrible price of loss of the penis.

All the events of the day that have attracted Myshkin's attention in a fixed way or evoked the sense of a repressed idea struggling to consciousness suggest the emergence of the feared homosexual wish and the penalty for submission: the significance of Rogozhin's eyes and his knife are clear; the Skoptsy, the tenants of Rogozhin's house, practice self-castration; the Holbein painting of Christ, his body so bruised and so thoroughly dead that, as Myshkin says, "that picture might make some people lose their faith," depicts the terrible fate of the Son who submits to the Father: "not my will, but thine, be done." Even the story of the peasant who slits his friends's throat and steals his watch as they prepare for bed together suggests the submerged homosexual wish and fear.

The wish and the fear are perilously close to realization in the image of Rogozhin with his knife raised. At this point the excitement aroused by the desire to submit sexually to the father and by the terror of castration becomes unbearably intense and the ego is overwhelmed in the epileptic attack; the barriers of the ego are broken and it is flooded with instinctual excitement. The cry, the convulsive movements, and the loss of consciousness of the fit are at once a sort of exaggerated representation of and a substitute for the release of orgasm, the logical culmination of this symbolic coitus in which Myshkin is both spectator and participant. The scene ends with Myshkin falling downstairs and striking his head; the fit has saved him from Rogozhin's knife, but through a familiar equation by which the head stands for the penis, the feared injury to the genital is represented symbolically in the bloodied head. Moreover, the head is perhaps punished as the source of evil impulses, the representation of the mind in which the whole fantastic episode has originated.

One curious aspect of this sequence is the guilt that Myshkin feels throughout the day whenever he becomes momentarily aware of his fear of Rogozhin:

> (Oh, how the prince was tortured by the hideousness, the 'degradation' of this conviction, of 'that base foreboding,' and how he had

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> reproached himself!) 'Say of what if you dare,' he kept telling himself continually with reproach and challenge. 'Formulate all your thought, dare to express it clearly, precisely, without faltering! Oh, I am ignoble!' he repeated with indignation and a flush on his face. 'With what eyes shall I look upon that man for the rest of my life! Oh, what a day! Oh, God, what a nightmare!'

Myshkin assumes that his suspicions of Rogozhin, his loss of confidence in him, are in some way responsible for Rogozhin's attack on him. In the deepest sense, this is true, for the attack is in fact a representation of Myshkin's thoughts and desires. The chaste and gentle prince has the same passions as other men, the same energies of lust and hatred. What distinguishes him from the violent souls around him is that Myshkin can only experience these forces passively; they must appear to overwhelm him from outside, through the agency of Rogozhin, who represents both the violation from outside that is the destiny of the meek soul, and the violence that it fears within itself and projects outwards onto the figure of the aggressor. The form in which instinctual forces are expressed in the scene of the attack, the absolutely primitive lust and aggression of Rogozhin, suggests the reason for the terror these forces inspire in Myshkin and explains the unearthly purity of his personality: the expression of instinct is conceived of as leading to mutilation and even to death.

In *The Idiot*, then, the epileptic seizure is overdetermined in an extremely complex way; it is a sort of nodal point at which all the strands of sexual and aggressive feeling are tied into a single expression. It has a sexual meaning as a substitute for and a symbolic representation of erotic contact with the father, which implies the terrifying corollary of castration. But the suffering or deathlike aspect of the attack also serves as a punishment for the parricidal wishes aroused by the fear of castration, here reinforced by the homosexual wish. As it is represented in the novel, the epileptic personality is one in which sexual and aggressive drives have assumed a particularly dangerous character, involving homosexual and parricidal wishes so threatening to the ego that they must be entirely repressed. The epileptic seizure, then, represents the periodic eruption of these energies in the form of a violent attack in which the ego does indeed lose all control.

But Myshkin's epilepsy has also another dimension, a powerfully positive aspect that makes it the fundamental enigma of his being, the point of transformation at which disease may become sanctity. This double quality of Myshkin's illness suggests that the dualism and the violent antinomies of Dostoevsky's whole conception of moral experi-

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ence may originate in part in the radically opposed meanings of epilepsy. Epilepsy is what sets Myshkin apart from other men in every way; it is weakness, illness, idiocy. But if it is illness, it is the *morbus sacer*, the sacred disease of shamans and prophets who are torn by the rough hand of God, who see through this rent in the fabric of their beings into another world, a luminous reality free of the limitations and ambiguities of ordinary experience. This mystical aspect of Myshkin's epilepsy is concentrated in the aura, the momentary alteration of consciousness that precedes the fit, which is described in the following passage:

> he always had one minute just before the epileptic fit . . . when suddenly in the midst of sadness, spiritual darkness and oppression, there seemed at moments a flash of light in his brain, and with extraordinary impetus all his vital forces suddenly began working at their highest tension. The sense of life, the consciousness of self, were multiplied ten times at these moments, which passed like a flash of lightning. His mind and his heart were flooded with extraordinary light; all his uneasiness, all his doubts, all his anxieties were relieved at once; they were all resolved into a kind of lofty calm, full of serene, harmonious joy and hope, full of understanding and the knowledge of the ultimate cause of things. But these moments, these flashes, were only the prelude of that final second . . . with which the fit began. That second was, of course, unendurable.

He wonders whether this is only a morbid effect of his illness.

> And yet he came at last to an extremely paradoxical conclusion. 'What if it is disease?' he decided at last. 'What does it matter that it is an abnormal intensity, if the result, if the minute of sensation, remembered and analysed afterwards in health, turns out to be the acme of harmony and beauty, and gives a feeling, unknown and undivined till then, of completeness, of proportion, of reconciliation, and of ecstatic devotional merging in the highest synthesis of life?' . . . These moments were only an extraordinary quickening of self-consciousness—if the condition was to be expressed in one word—and at the same time of the direct sensation of existence in the most intense degree.

The features repeatedly stressed in this account of the aura are the flashes and floods of light, the heightened intensity and directness of the sensation of self and of existence, and above all the ecstatic sense of harmony in which qualities of reconciliation, synthesis, and merging are emphasized. In this "ecstatic devotional merging" Myshkin, like others who have had the mystical experience, feels a sudden resolution

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of doubts and conflicts and a sense of oneness with something outside himself, with the "highest synthesis of life." This sense of oneness with the universe seems to be the "oceanic feeling" described by Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, where he explains it as a dissolution of the boundaries of the ego, a regression to the primordial state of the infant at the breast, who "does not as yet distinguish his ego from the external world as the source of the sensations flowing in upon him."

The "extraordinary quickening of self-consciousness" in the aura may seem inconsistent with the loss of the sense of an individualized self suggested by the oceanic feeling and by Myshkin's sense of ecstatic merging. However, the "self" in this passage seems to be not Myshkin's everyday self, which is often beset by doubt and guilt, but a quite different self free of any sense of limitation, open to "the direct sensation of existence in the most intense degree." This euphoric sense of self is quite compatible with the oceanic feeling. Freud writes,

> Originally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive—indeed an all-embracing—feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it. . . . There are many people in whose mental life this primary ego-feeling has persisted . . . side by side with the narrower and more sharply demarcated ego-feeling of maturity. . . . The ideational contents appropriate to it would be precisely those of limitlessness and of a bond with the universe. . . .

Myshkin's quickened consciousness of self in the epileptic aura is not the "sharply demarcated ego-feeling of maturity," but rather a return to the all-embracing "primary ego-feeling."

This dissolution of boundaries affects not only the ego's relationship with the external world, but also the balance of forces within the mind. With the decrease in repression comes increased access to the id. In *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Freud writes,

> certain mystical practices may succeed in upsetting the normal relations between the different regions of the mind, so that, for instance, perception may be able to grasp happenings in the depths of the ego and in the id which were otherwise inaccessible to it.

This change in the functions and relations of the different parts of the mind in mystical experience can be compared with what happens in manic-depressive illness. Although the mystic and the manic-depressive are different in obvious ways, there are interesting resemblances which suggest that the underlying pattern of sudden changes

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in the distribution of energy within the mind may be similar. In manic-depressive illness, the personality is dominated for long periods by a severe superego, which prohibits instinctual expression. At the onset of the manic phase, the dammed-up instinctual energy associated with repressed ideas and impulses erupts explosively, overthrowing the superego and producing a feeling of elation and fantasies of omnipotence.

The personality of the mystic, at least that typical of the great Catholic mystics of Europe, is also dominated by superego; the mystic lives under a severe regime of mortification of the flesh, fasting, and chastity. But this instinctual deprivation is apparently compensated by the joy of the mystical experience, for which denial of the senses is the preparation. The mystical vision is often preceded by a terrible period of intellectual and sexual temptation, doubts and obscene visions, not unlike the ordeal of Myshkin's long day in Petersburg before the fit. After enduring this torment, the mystic is rewarded by the mystical revelation. This revelation may include the apparition of Christ, the saints, or the Virgin, often described in intensely sexual language. Or it may be a more generalized experience—an ineffable sense of beatitude or absorption into the radiance of the divine being such as Myshkin has during the epileptic aura. As in mania, there is an eruption of long repressed instinctual energy and the superego is overthrown; the ego is free to experience the gratification of id impulses, although in a form disguised by and consonant with religious beliefs.

Thus the sense of merging, reconciliation, and synthesis in mystical experience refers not only to the feeling of oneness with the external world, but also to the annihilation of internal conflict as the repressive superego is overthrown and id energy rushes into the ego, producing the intensely heightened feeling of self-consciousness and of "the direct sensation of existence." The "extraordinary light" that floods the mind and heart of Myshkin appears to be an image of this surge of energy. The reality principle is deposed by the pleasure principle, which seeks immediate gratification. Thus the sense of time, a function of the ego associated with the delay of gratification, is suspended during the mystical experience, which is always described as somehow outside of time. Myshkin understands during the ecstatic moment the saying "there shall be no more time"; it is this moment, he says, "which was not long enough for the water to be spilt out of Mahomet's pitcher, though the epileptic prophet had time to gaze at all the habitations of Allah." Thus the brilliant, unlimited, harmonious vision that comes to Myshkin during the epileptic aura is a regression

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to the timeless world of the primitive ego, buried in the oldest layers of the mind and illuminated during the instant of the aura like a dark landscape in a flash of lightning.

The moment of the aura is virtually the only point in *The Idiot* at which instinctual impulses break through the barriers of repression with sufficient force to be felt as pleasurable and gratifying. At this point the sexual and aggressive feelings usually experienced by Myshkin in the disguised masochistic form of suffering rush into the ego with an effect of ecstatic and joyful release. But the ego cannot tolerate the force of these energies in their original form, nor can it allow the ideas attached to them—the wishes towards the father contained in the primal scene fantasy—to rise into conscious awareness. The moment of orgiastic release is followed by the total eclipse of the ego in the epileptic seizure. The fit is also the revenge of the superego, which can be deposed only temporarily; for the release of sexual and aggressive energy it exacts the talion penalty of symbolic castration and death. The instinctual drives are once more experienced under the negative sign of superego, in the form of asceticism and suffering.

The epileptic scenes are the points in the novel at which experience reaches its highest intensity; these episodes are in a sense the prototypes of the emotional experience of *The Idiot*. In the great scenes of climactic emotion or violent confrontation, the reader is led to participate in a kind of loss of control: the ego of the protagonist, under the assault of repressed impulses, gives way to energies and fantasies usually inaccessible to it and undergoes an enormous expansion of its capacity for perception and feeling. But this momentary expansion also exposes it to the possibility of annihilation through the savage force of id energies and the retaliation of superego. The result is the collapse of the ego in frenzy, loss of consciousness, or epileptic convulsions.

This characteristic mode of emotional response is what might be called the "epileptic pattern" in the novel. Its positive value is in one sense enormous: at its most acute, in the aura, it constitutes the claim for the "mystical" quality of Myshkin's insight and of his personality. These moments of heightened consciousness represent a breakthrough beyond the barriers of repression that define the normal conditions of the ego into a state in which the darker regions of personality are illuminated and the sense of existence is immeasurably intensified. In such states the conscious mind appears to be offered the possibility of penetrating a limitless reality. The condition of this final knowledge is, of course, annihilation. This is the ambiguity and the fundamental paradox of the moments of greatest intensity in the novel: the most

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piercing consciousness of the self comes at the point of the destruction of personality, at the moment when the ego is about to give way and the mind to return to a primitive and undifferentiated mode of response. The moment of highest meaning in Myshkin's experience—the brilliant awareness of the texture of existence itself in the epileptic aura—is also the very moment when existence is on the verge of collapse into meaningless emptiness. Myshkin himself knows this:

> he often said to himself that all these gleams and flashes of the highest sensation of life and self-consciousness, and therefore also of the highest form of existence, were nothing but disease . . . and if so, it was not at all the highest form of being, but on the contrary must be reckoned the lowest.

And later: "Stupefaction, spiritual darkness, idiocy stood before him conspicuously as the consequence of these 'higher moments'"; but "for the infinite happiness he had felt in it, that second really might well be worth the whole of life."

The epileptic seizure offers to Myshkin a sudden dazzling moment of vision and knowledge. The content of the moment, what is actually seen and understood, can never really be articulated. Myshkin knows only that an instant of intense joy and light is followed by stupefaction, terror, and darkness. The extreme and ineffable quality of the experience, its utter incommensurability with language, suggests that its ideational content is deeply repressed. Here the seizure, like a neurotic symptom, functions as an expression of unconscious conflict. The neurotic symptom wards off repressed impulses while at the same time expressing and gratifying them, but in a distorted form that keeps them from conscious awareness. Thus, paradoxically, the symptom enacts its own concealed significance.

No single meaning can be attributed to epileptic seizures in general. Myshkin's illness, however, manifests itself in a quite specific context, in which the seizure is densely inscribed with meaning. His convulsion occurs as he mounts an internal staircase around a column, tries not to see and yet does see a standing man in a niche, and is then attacked with a knife. These images evoke the wish for penetration, active and passive, and the fear of punishment. The penetration is at once physical, visual, and psychological: a body is entered, but at the same time something is seen, and the frontier of forbidden knowledge and desire is crossed.

The structure and stability of personality and also its limitations normally depend upon the repression of such forbidden material. In the seizure Myshkin is given a glimpse into the abyss of repressed

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fantasies and fears and is momentarily released from structure and limitation. The unconscious fantasy, in which the sexual wish towards the father leads to castration and death, is an extraordinarily powerful and dangerous one. Its sudden release and symbolic enactment leads to an ecstatic sense of harmony and freedom—the "highest form of being"—but also to the opposite state—terror, guilt, and final collapse.

In the compulsion towards such extreme and opposed mental states lies much of Dostoevsky's extraordinary power and tension. Each of the novels is a sort of spiritual experiment with the darkest forces of the psyche; in the outcome the protagonist hovers for a time between omnipotence and annihilation, then falls to annihilation. In *The Idiot* the connections between that conception of the spiritual life and the dangerous excitements of epilepsy are clear.

It is into the darkness that lies beyond the controls of the ego, the perilous region of unmodified instinct and savage retaliation, that we are invited by the great scenes of mounting tension and final frenzy and collapse. In *The Idiot* more than anywhere else in Dostoevsky we are taken beyond intellectual speculation about and description of these states into the actual experience itself. Again and again the novel leads us out onto this treacherous ground; beyond this precipice is the abyss of total abandonment in frenzy or stupor—the loss of the ego and all its complicated negotiations between the inner world of instinctual drives and the outer world of external reality. In the compulsion to lean out over that abyss the novel also risks its own existence as an aesthetic object. In their explosive force, the great scenes threaten to escape the control of the plot, to disrupt the continuity of the narrative and drive it into incoherence. This flirtation with loss of form is the analogue in the structure of the novel to the courting of loss of ego control in the protagonists, especially Myshkin. Thus the novel, in its terrible fidelity to psychological experience, almost loses itself in the gamble.

Almost, but not quite. Form and meaning are salvaged perilously, although *The Idiot* does not always give its meanings their true names. Like all dark forces, they must sometimes be called holy, as the Furies were named Gracious Ones. The knowledge of those forces is in some way bound up with the profound ambiguities of epilepsy: in the representation of the epileptic seizure the most primitive energies of psychic life, its oldest and most forbidden meanings, are symbolically enacted, animating with their tremendous power a vision in which degradation and sanctity are inextricably mingled. In *The Idiot* the experience of epilepsy is not only illness and incapacity, but tragic and dangerous revelation.

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Jay Martin

THE LAST BOOK

The new book. The first book. In dismissing Henry Miller's unpublished novel, *Crazy Cock*, Michael Fraenkel had urged him: "Write as you talk. Write as you live. Write as you feel and think. Just sit down before the machine and let go. . . . Evacuate the trenches!" That, if only Henry knew himself well enough, was good advice. He decided to find out how he did live and think and feel. Inspired now by the mere existence of Anaïs Nin's *Journal Intime* (which he had not yet read in its entirety), and accepting the logic of the confessional impulse from which her book had sprung, he decided to compose his own autobiography as a diary. He called it "The Last Book." Later he called it "The Tropic of Capricorn" and finally *The Tropic of Cancer.*

Probably to conserve paper, but with a nice gesture of dismissal for his previous work, he turned over the sheets of his original Tony Bring manuscript (of *Crazy Cock*) and rolled the clean side upward into the typewriter. Richard Galen Osborn was on his mind and he began the logbook of his desperate life with the story of Osborn, himself, and Irene, the Russian princess. This was an account of a woman who lived with them and preyed on the two of them, especially upon Dick, while assuring them of the truth of the most outlandish tales of her past and keeping them away from her by claiming that she had a dose.

At once the line between fiction and reportage broke down. Whatever Henry said was true *was* true, at least for that moment. The only rule that remained was the drive to digress. Soon, everything was going into the diary, all the stories of his Paris years. "It's like a big, public garbage can," he wrote to Ned Schnellock. "Only the mangy cats are missing. But I'll get them in yet." In they went. He pillaged his notebooks for additional material, observations, quotations, questions. Some he even pasted in, along with newspaper clippings and menus. A description of Wambly Bald's room went in along with a catalogue of the labels and brand names of the liquors from which Bald distilled his column. One day while he was writing, the voice of a woman singing "Never wanted to . . . What am I to do?" drifted into his room. The

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song and her rich, dark voice went into the book. He wrote to Bertha, hoping to put some of his love letters in the book. They didn't go in: she replied that on the day that his actions had ceased to correspond with his words she had destroyed his letters. "The bitch," he growled inwardly, and went on to castigate her in his diary. From "Bezeque" he extracted the story of the prostitute with the dying mother. The Cirque Medrano was revisited. That went in. George Grosz's paintings, as well as Grosz's and Spengler's ideas about "the late-city man," were inserted. Herbert Wilkie of Valier, Montana, and Marseilles appeared, a "confessed pederast." Nanavati, Eugene Pachoutinsky, Fred Perlès, Germaine, Samuel Putnam, Zadkine, Mlle. Claude, Fraenkel, and Lowenfels appeared, each pursuing his own destiny, illumined by his own mania. The higher mathematics of the gospel of death were formularized. The whole Dijon Episode was spun out with high humor. For good seasoning, Papini, Duhamel's *Salavin*, Rabelais, Proust, Whitman, Annie Besant's *The Ancient Wisdom*, and Keyserling's *Creative Understanding* were stirred in. Henry had given up any desire to defend himself. Defenseless, his single motto now as *Fais ce que vouldras*: do anything—so long as it yields ecstasy.

Certainly, there were many presences here, but Miller was finding his own voice among theirs as he pounded at his typewriter in the Hotel Central in a room next to Fred's. He radiated the excitement of his self-discovery. In those days, as Perlès has said beautifully, his friends walked in his shadow, "and even his shadow was warm." He expanded in every direction: everything he did took on a new dimension. He was up every morning at six. With mountains of books piled high on his work table, enormous charts tacked to the walls, Beethoven or jazz or an African laughing record blaring at full volume from the victrola (a present from Anaïs), his typewriter racing over the speed limit, the gargantuan became commonplace and it almost seemed as if the tiny hotel room could not contain him.

As a matter of practical fact, it was obvious to Henry and Fred that they would save money and live more pleasantly by renting an apartment together; not only would they be able to divide the rent, they would be able to prepare their own meals, as they could not do in the hotel. Fred's affections settled upon a flat in a recently-built row of apartment buildings at 4 rue Anatole France in Clichy, just on the outskirts of Paris. It did not particularly appeal to Henry for it was like being transported back 3,000 miles and 20 years to the apartment rows put up above Central Park. Henry would have preferred a studio or

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grand, old-fashioned Parisian hotel apartment. At the Clichy place the look was functional-modern, the architecture was undistinguished; the interiors were plain and angular, unmarked by time or human use. Much as in some tough areas of New York, there was a spot on the way to the apartment that was dangerous to cross at night: along the junkyards between the Porte Clichy, with its trolley terminals and garages, and the beginning of Clichy itself. But the kitchen and bathroom decided the issue: to Fred's eyes these were glorious. The fixtures were new, the faucets didn't drip, the toilet seat was intact, and the bowl didn't run all night. In addition, there were two bedrooms separated by a hallway, which made it possible for Henry and Fred to come and go quite separately or entertain friends privately. (Fred had a young woman named Paulette living with him.)

The French would have said that Henry had at last established a *domicile fixe*. But after years of transience Henry could not dare to call the Clichy flat more than "pseudo-permanent." For Fred, so long relegated to the shabby and second-hand, the bourgeois modernity of the place was marvellous. For Henry it was a simple financial arrangement, based on the fact that the rent was far below ordinary hotel rates. At 5,100 francs plus the tax at the end of the year, they could afford to come to the agreement that if either one lost his job the other would support him there.

Before the middle of March 1932, they moved their few belongings into rue Anatole France. Henry, of course, promptly lost his job—though not as a direct result of any calculation of his own. As early as the second of March, the accounting office at the *Tribune* had asked him to put his Work Permit on file. Since arriving in Paris he had never registered for employment. Now, when he did so, he was refused a permit. For this reason, before the middle of March he received a notice of termination from the *Tribune*, and two weeks later, on the twenty-fifth, his dismissal came in a letter from Jules Frantz, the managing editor. That night, during the break, when Henry cornered Jules in Johnny's Bar and accused him of injustice—for there were a number of Americans who were working at the *Tribune* without permits—Frantz hung his head and muttered some excuses about "economy" and promised to allow Henry to go downstairs as a proofreader again for the vacation period. But though he excoriated Frantz, in truth Henry was secretly gratified. Again, he told himself, he owed his salvation to the French , had his application been granted, he might have been obliged to drudge forever like Fred and Bald until a

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time when he would actually become fearful that he might lose his job, should that ever become all he had to cling to. No, he had become unhinged from the desire for job, family, and position by the cruel treatment he had received at the hands of circumstance. Nothing, he felt, could be lower than the depths to which he had fallen at Nanavati's or the Cinéma Vanves. How could he concern himself over the mere loss of a newspaper job? Everything that happened was exactly what was meant to happen. To convert defeats into triumphs! That was as much as he could ask. For the first time, Henry was thoroughly convinced that he had lived out his fate and had a destiny to fulfill.

Besides, he was working at such a pace now that the extra four-and-a-half hours that he had gained by his dismissal from the paper were put to immediate and good use. He was so full of energy that he hardly seemed to need sleep—no more than five hours. He slept, he claimed, only for the pleasure of dreaming. He dreamed constantly: of the books he would read (loaned by Anaïs or filched from the American library), of the water colors he would make (influenced by Klee, Chagall, and Picasso), and, above all, of the books he would write. There was a depression all over the world; literary men, like the economy, had diminished expectations. Miller was one of the few American writers who by 1932 still preserved the grandiloquent hope of the twenties: to compose works as great as any that had ever been written. Many others wanted only to compose something "proletarian," something superior to Gorky. Henry was ready to take on the *Iliad*, Rabelais, Joyce, Proust—and the Holy Ghost, if need be. At this moment he was sure about his destiny. He *had* to write a certain number of pages each day, he told Alf, "for the sake of posterity."

Now he arranged his life like pieces on a chess board—in little ordered graduated rows, so much space for everything and everything having a place. He lived, as he had wished to live in Remsen Street (without the disorder introduced by June), a simple, bare Japanese life. Each morning he arose, washed thoroughly and straightened up after himself, raised the curtains, and, though naked, inspected the doings in the courtyard, then dressed and made his bed. His teutonic habits of orderliness prevailed until the matter of work came up—then he would explode. Sometimes as he began to prepare his morning meal he'd notice a book he had left unfinished the night before. Then he'd forget breakfast altogether. Instead of clearing a place for his plate, he'd pick up an enormous tome by Rank, Jung, or Keyserling and start in reading. This was a promising sign. Soon there'd be a pencil in his

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hand and he'd be annotating the margins, at first sparsely, then copiously. From that stage to the next required only a jump to the typewriter, usually to copy out a particularly meaty passage. Then he'd toss the book aside in order to start right into squeezing the juices out of it, possibly in a letter to Emil Schnellock or Anaïs. By now his fingers would be flying over the keys, as if he had leaped with hardly a transition from the "Moonlight Sonata" to the "Minute Waltz," and he'd be ready to turn to "The Last Book." He went like lightning once he got to this work. The associations that had begun in his reading would accumulate and bubble into new blendings which went far beyond their origin. Those were the days when writing was as easy as singing—no wonder that even as he was typing he'd occasionally burst into song. Ten or more sheets might easily roll in and out of his typewriter before he was ready, having missed breakfast, to stop for lunch. He didn't worry any more about losing an idea. For the first time in his life, to begin writing seemed no harder than turning on a tap. Like running water, the stream of recollections, words, and ideas was always there—he had only to turn on the faucet to have the flow begin or snap it off to give the illusion that it had ceased.

After lunch, which would sometimes be washed down with a fresh Vouvray or a Muscadet, he'd arrange everything neatly and go through his daily ceremony: he'd undress completely, put on his pajamas, and tuck himself cosily into bed for a nice nap. This seemed to his friends to be an incredibly self-indulgent luxury, but it was a necessity of his routine: his sleep not only, as he claimed, put "velvet in his vertebrae," it was a deliberate damming up of the stream until, on its own, it overflowed its banks. His dreams, which he cultivated, were also part of his work, imparting new angles and different directions to the thoughts of the morning. The nap was also, clearly, a beautiful return to his childhood, whose bourgeois tranquility the Clichy flat recalled. He was like a child tucked into his bed for his afternoon nap, a good boy. So much of his adult life had destroyed his dreams that he was committed now to dreaming his way backward to childhood, and forward to art again.

Upon awakening he might even hold back the headwaters a little longer while he took an excursion on his bicycle or by foot. By the time he sat down at the typewriter again his fingers were itching to slaughter the machine, like a drummer. The flood would rumble along for several hours of the late afternoon. On this work schedule, twenty, thirty, forty, and—on one day—forty-five pages (with two carbons) would be stacked up beside the laboring typewriter before dinner. He

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would have been playing music all day, keeping time to the music, and by the end, a triumphal column of records would be piled next to the victrola. All the ashtrays would be filled with Gauloises Bleues. A visitor could count the stubs and figure that there would be one burnt-out Bleu for each page he had produced. And, far from being tired, Henry would be full of vinegar, ready to reach for a bottle—of a velvety Nuits St. Georges, say—when Fred came home in the evening and sat down at the kitchen table for a chat.

Fred was working on a novel of his own in just the opposite way from Henry's volcanic outpourings. As Paulette put it: "Monsieur Henri can type much faster than you, and when he sits at his typewriter he goes on for hours without a stop." Henry was unconcerned about his productivity because he produced so much, while Fred avoided that concern by deliberately limiting his writing to no more than two pages a day. If he reached the bottom of that second page (and most often he didn't reach it) he'd stop abruptly, even in the middle of a sentence. To Fred this procedure was eminently clear and perfectly rational. As he often explained it: "Two pages a day, 365 days in the year, that makes 730 pages. If I can do 250 in a year I'll be satisfied. I'm not writing a *roman fleuve*." He was in fact writing a book in French called *Sentiments limitrophes*—a book of "peripheral feelings," a work about the fragments of his memory and the streams of association flowing between memories. Although these memories went back to his childhood, they also included recent ones and involved portraits of Henry, June, and Anaïs Nin. Henry was certain that he himself could not match the delicate power and transparency, like that of a perfect watercolor, of Alf's book. Fred's writing he thought of as a "subtle distillation" and declared that he liked it better than anything he could do himself. But though their methods of composition were different, the books shared a similar view of the flexibility and rapidity of the faculty of memory, were influenced by Proust's treatment of recollection, and had some of the same materials: their mutual acquaintances. And finally, they were, as Henry wrote to Alf after both volumes were published, "companion books in misery and loneliness."

In the evening, then, Henry and Fred were likely to loaf over a bottle of wine and talk about their work for the day, add up their funds and discuss the women upon the horizon. If they lingered long enough to open a second bottle of wine and both started to feel euphoric, Fred might suddenly stop the conversation and seize Henry by the arm, begging him to bring him with him to America should he ever return. Then he'd urge Henry to give him an account of his travels in that

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fabulous place, America. Once Henry got started on the subject of places in the United States, no natural end to his monologue was foreseeable: it was like mentioning the decline of the Western world, painting, sex, or the role of the artist to him. Just ask him for a good description of Miami or mention Santa Fe and he'd be on the wing. He had his own especially favorite places, such as Mobile Bay and Big Sur. About these places he had never seen he could spin dazzling improvisations. But no matter how long he rambled on about these, at the end, when he was spent with his mental travelogue, Alf would always pipe up with the demand: "*Now* tell me about Arizona." It was not one of Henry's specialities, and he'd sometimes growl: "The hell with Arizona. I'm going to bed. I've told you all I know." "Then tell me again," Fred would ask in a tone of blissful expectation. They'd both have had a skinful of wine and Fred's eyes would be shining with tears of joy. Almost invariably, Henry would start in again, inventing freely. Very likely, he'd become newly interested in the subject and begin to talk about the places he wanted to visit before he died—Mexico, India, Greece, the land of Saladin, Tibet. From the latter he expected to continue on to Devechan; but before that time came, Henry would ruminate, there'd be time to see Fillmore Place once again as well as the bayous at the mouth of the Mississippi. When he finished, perhaps an hour later, Fred would gratefully raise a ruby glass of Porto *sec* to him and say: "Now tell me about *Arizona*!"

Such epic expressions of their *sentiments limitrophes* were, of course, reserved for special occasions and demanded Fred's night off from work for proper elaboration. And, of course, he and Fred were not always alone. Occasionally, one of Miller's friends would arrive. Fraenkel, still deep in the writing of his gospels of anonymity and death, often came to mull over his ideas. Start him anywhere and soon Fraenkel would be in the cemetery and battlefield, tallying up the corpses. At this point, Fred was likely to beat a strategic retreat and take himself off to the Restaurant de l'Escargot if he had any cash, or, if he didn't, to Giolotte's on the rue Lamartine, where the staff of the *Tribune*—housed just across the street—could run up tabs. Henry and Michael would monumentally occupy the apartment, jabbering about "creative suicide" to their heart's content. But if he had ever been, Henry was no longer on Fraenkel's side. He had concluded that Fraenkel was right in every particular but one: everyone was dead—everyone but Henry himself. For Henry, Fraenkel's gospel of death became a measure of his own triumph. As Michael became more and more convincing, Henry became more and more justified. All the

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people he wrote about—Bertha, Bald, Fred and even Fraenkel—were like so many cold corpses in transparent caskets. He, Henry, danced alone in the graveyard, picking flowers.

For Michael, that was a definite and unwelcome compromise. But it was just as he had feared. Even before Henry left for Dijon, Fraenkel had cautioned him: "The reason I wanted you to commit suicide that evening at the Lowenfels'. . . . I was afraid, terribly afraid, that some day you'd go back on me; die on my hands. And I would be left high and dry with my idea of you simply, and nothing to sustain it. I should never forgive you for that." He meant by this simply that he wanted Henry to commit creative suicide by admitting that his life was a death. By the spring of 1932, however, Henry came alive for himself. Now, Michael's once-respected letter was inserted into "The Last Book" as an instance of the gospel of mumbo-jumbo.

But Richard Osborn actually threatened to die on their hands. During the winter while Henry was in Dijon, Dick experienced a complete mental breakdown with paranoic delusions. The hospital on the outskirts of Paris in which he was incarcerated was literally nightmarish, and at least part of Osborn's fears had a real basis. He had been living with a younger French girl named Jeanne who had become pregnant by him—or at least he *thought* she was pregnant and he believed he was the father. He'd "knocked her up"—he kept mumbling that to himself as if even biology were persecuting him. None of his Paris friends would have predicted the next development. His Bridgeport morals reasserted themselves: he *wanted* to marry her, the woman he had ruined. He was preparing to die, hoping to die—and his mind was dying—but he was determined to "do the right thing" first.

In the asylum Osborn was raving: like a bursting star, his mind was shooting fragments in every direction. He suspected that while he was out during the day Jeanne had had men up to the apartment. He had gotten the clap and given it to her, and he said with tears streaming down his face how miserable he felt. But the next moment he'd claim that it was Jeanne, the little slut, who'd given him the dose and pretended to have gotten it from him. He couldn't bear to leave her, he wailed. But then, he'd say he was desperate to escape from her but had no chance; she'd track him down and claw his eyes out if he tried to defect. He wanted to marry the poor girl, he claimed in resolute tones. But as soon as he said that he'd turn around and curse his fate: now he'd be stuck in a provincial town forever. Christ!—all he had wanted was a fling in Paris before settling down to a practice in corporation law, with a nice house in Bridgeport and an office in Wall Street. His

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mind had collapsed: he was paralyzed by fears of others and accusations of himself.

Henry vowed to save the poor devil, no matter how desperate the required measures might be. He tried to penetrate the fogs of Osborn's paranoia to discover what had actually happened. Henry talked to some of Jeanne's friends and neighbors and concluded that she was not pregnant, only growing fat from indolence. After a while he simply gave up and decided that the truth was irrelevant. The main thing was to save Dick. Some time later when Osborn was released from the hospital and allowed to return to Paris, Henry determined that he should light out, abandon Jeanne and return to America. There was nowhere in France that he could hide from Jeanne, if in fact she decided to track him down. Certainly, as soon as Dick got back in Paris, she seized him like a spider; she didn't quite devour him, but she wouldn't let him out of her sight. One day in late July, Henry ran into him on the Right Bank. "I'm just on my way to the bank to draw out some money," he said uneasily, "I've got to be back in a half-hour. I don't know what to do." It was a sunny, breezy Paris day. Outwardly Osborn looked like a healthy American—well-dressed, bareheaded, with a little paunch. But there was a dizziness in his eyes. "You've got to help me out of this," he suddenly urged Henry with desperation in his voice. "I don't belong here. I wish I were home." He started to blubber and go to pieces. He groaned about his disgust with the cruelty and sterility of the French, a people he once adored. It even drove him crazy, he said, to have to speak incessantly in French.

Henry's thoughts were going fast and he took Dick's arm. He formed a crazy scheme—crazy enough to work. Henry decided to break his plan easily to Osborn—otherwise sheer panic might follow. "I'm going to help you," he said. "Let's have a drink." Dick looked at him with horror. Hysteria danced behind his eyes. To have a drink, to invite Jeanne's displeasure, to be late returning from his errand, to put his trust in this irresponsible Henry Miller—even this sounded crazy to Osborn. "Relax, sit down. Let's have a whiskey, an American whiskey," Henry said. The whiskey did it. As the American spirits arrived, looking velvety and golden brown, his eyes brimmed with tears. He seized Henry as if he were his last friend and sang the praises of their native land, which he said he dared not hope to see again. The garçon arrived with a second drink. "Bottoms up!" Henry commanded. Dick downed it at once. "Listen," Henry said, "if I were in your boots, I'd go—I'd go to America, without hesitation, today." Osborn glanced about, as if the mere whispering of such an idea would be enough to

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bring Jeanne down on his head. "How much do you have in the bank? Is it yours or Jeanne's father's?" Henry asked. Getting satisfactory answers to both questions, he outlined his plan. He gave his voice the air of command and authority, like that of a major ordering academy cadets about. The plan was insanely simple. At once—hatless—lacking a cane—abandoning his mackintosh, his manuscripts, and even his Yale diploma—without even returning to his apartment to pick up a toothbrush—Osborn was to board a boat to his native land. In hardly more than a week, Henry reminded him, he'd be back in Bridgeport. The slapstick plan was so preposterous that Osborn went right along with it. Henry had never acted decisively in any of his own crises, but he had become desperate enough to learn to be resourceful. "Jesus, Osborn," Henry said to buck him up, "why by tonight you'll be in London up to your ears in English."

Henry shepherded him through the ordeals of the bank, the British consulate and American Express, with a pause at a fine restaurant and a farewell bottle of wine, the finest on the menu. With Dick's money stuffed into his pockets he was pretty exhilarated by the events himself. By the time they were on their way to the Gare du Nord in a cab, he had changed all but about 2,500 francs of Dick's money into traveler's checks and pounds. In great confusion Osborn tried to explain how to break the news to Jeanne and was getting muddled and feeling responsible and preparing to collapse on Henry's hands. But now Henry was determined to see it through. "Never mind that," he told Dick. "How much dough do you want to give her?—that's all!" Osborn looked ready to faint: "How much do you have?" "About 2,000 francs, more than she deserves," Henry replied. "I don't know . . ." Osborn said weakly, wanting to go and wanting to stay. "All right, I'll give her all this French money," Henry said, holding up the two-thousand.

So it was settled. Henry pocketed the dough and promised to see Jeanne the very next day, and he pushed the tottering wreck onto the boat train, and Dick was off toward America.

America!—how much Henry himself had wanted to return to his country. Once, he had begged his friends and his wife to send him the funds to come home, fearful that he would starve to death in France. He had been as desperate to get out as Osborn was. So, as he sat in a café on the Place Lafayette, he counted Osborn's money up to a total of 2,800 francs—$125. That was enough for a ticket to America. Who would ever know if Jeanne never got the money at all? Even if Osborn did write to her, who would believe him, a crazy fellow who had

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performed the kind of act unthinkable to the French—boarding a boat for London without picking up his reversible or planting his hat firmly on his head! If Henry wanted to follow Dick to America, then, he had but to take a train to Le Havre or Cherbourg and wait for a departure. It was the first time since he had been in Paris that he had any choice about his own fate. He sat in the Place Lafayette and let his thoughts drift. All the defects that Osborn found in French life were there all right—the selfishness and indifference, the insistence on the reasonable and restrained, the petty severity and mean puritanism—there for Frenchmen at least. But for an American, like himself, who had not caved in, an American who knew where his next meal was coming from, France was just fine; he could ask no more. The way the colored awnings were gently flapping in the breeze, the chestnut trees spilling gold sequins in blond beer, the clock ringing in a church tower—these all seemed to be a part of the flow of the seasons, the sweep of time, and yet for the very same reason to be immemorial and unchanging. It was not the whiskey or the wine or the last Pernod he shared with Dick that flowed through him—it was the golden stream of the life about him gliding by and then through him and becoming his life. Now that it came to a choice about returning to America, he discovered that the Paris which he had never chosen had chosen him. It was like his first Sunday in Paris: he would stay and live and write; he felt that same conviction again, only now it was born from experience and not innocence and was likely to last. He and Dick, that day, both made their way toward home.

This did not imply that Henry wasn't pleased with the escape plan which he had led Osborn to execute. He decided at once to vote himself a sizeable commission of 800 francs. He sent an even 2,000 francs to Jeanne by postal check that very afternoon. He enclosed a note written with his left hand, shakily, like Osborn's writing, saying: "*Chère Jeanne. Je suis parti pour l'Amerique. O.*" His haste could have been an error of a major sort, since Jeanne rapidly checked the schedules of French departures and was on a train that very evening to Le Havre where she kept her eye upon the departing steamship *Rochambeau* until it sailed. Fortunately Dick was departing that same day from Cherbourg for London on the *Olympic*.

Henry put his story into "The Last Book" even before Osborn landed in America. By this time the book was far enough advanced for him to take the chance of showing it to Lowenfels. Walter sensed its importance after reading the first fifty pages and wrote out eight pages of commentary on them. "He is careful to surround himself with dead

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people," Lowenfels remarked. "Naturally he adores Fraenkel. . . . Miller recognizes Fraenkel's death as the real thing, and so idolizes it. The others, the living dead, he had only to annihilate by—what? It's not contempt. It's that he is so alive nothing else can exist. It's like being close to the sun." "This book should be called," Lowenfels announced, "I am the only man in the world that's alive." For a while Henry actually thought of calling the novel "Cockeyed in Paris." At the end of the month he proposed two more titles to Anaïs: "I Sing the Equator" and "Tropic of Cancer." The first was an apt allusion to Whitman, but Anaïs's interests in astrology predisposed her to prefer the second. The title had several associations for Henry. Into his notebook he copied an excerpt from the *Satyricon*: "I was born myself under Cancer, and therefore stand on my Feet, as having large possessions both by Sea and Land!" Cancer is the crab, a creature who can move in many directions, the fabulous beast of the Chinese sagas. Cancer is also the sign of the poet who observes and exposes the disease of a civilization which is proceeding in the wrong direction; and finally, for Miller, it was the sign of death-in-life, with affinities to Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence as well as to Buddhist doctrine.

Tropic of Cancer is about the critical early period of Miller's poverty and personal despair in Paris. He uses his encounters with Bertha, Eugene Pachoutinsky, Fraenkel, Nanavati, Perlès, Osborn, and others as the symbols of the fragments into which his life had fallen. Death and nausea hover about him. He begins as he had begun the book in his earliest draft (though the real names were finally eliminated):

> I am living in the Villa Borghese. There is not a crumb of dirt anywhere, nor a chair misplaced. We are all alone here and we are dead.

But though death is the prison house about which he writes, it is the living artist who is writing the book. Surely he was right: in his worst days in Paris Henry Val Miller had really died from failure of the heart. But a new desperado had been reborn.

> I have no money, no resources, no hopes. I am the happiest man alive. . . .
>
> To sing you must first open your mouth. You must have a pair of lungs, and a little knowledge of music. It is not necessary to have

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> an accordion, or a guitar. The essential thing is to *want* to sing. This then is a song. I am singing.

Song, food, words, physical sensations of sex and many other kinds, the lunacy of acceptance, these bubble to the surface of the narrative even as Miller recounts his dark days—of hunger, decay, pain, cold, and the sense of personal extinction. The story he is telling, of course, is fundamentally an explanation of the book in which the story is told. How did such a book come to be written?—a book that is "a gob of spit in the face of Art, a kick in the pants to God, Man, Destiny, Time, Love, Beauty"? Such a book, he implies, could have been accomplished only through the death of the conventional artist and his resurrection into a man who sees with new eyes and tells his tale in accordance with a new compact with the world. At the time of his writing, the main character of the book and Miller were not at all identical. He had come out of his desperation in order to write—but he wrote from the point of view gained through his harrowing experiences.

This, then, is not an autobiography in the usual sense, though it is filled with chunks of the actual. It is an autobiography of Miller's present perspective on his past experience, which he changes freely to suit his present mood. The most brilliantly achieved instance of this kind of autobiographic transmutation occurs in the closing scene. Here, Henry Miller tells of how Val Miller saved Osborn (Fillmore) from the clutches of his French fiancée. In fact, Henry had delivered most of the francs left by Osborn to the girl. But in the autobiographic romance of *Tropic of Cancer* he pockets all the dough, since that is what such an artist as he now sees himself to be would do. And the money turns into a radiant symbol, a warm comforting bulge in his pocket. Under the spell of his money, he understands for the first time how joyous Paris is. He sits by the Seine and feels the river swelling and flowing through him with its burst of new freedom: "In the wonderful peace that fell over me it seemed as if I had climbed to the top of a high mountain; for a little while I would be able to look around me, to take in the meaning of the landscape." His first look, of course, will be the geography of his life in Paris. At the end of the book the character who can write the book is born.

Although he had not quite completed *Tropic of Cancer*, Miller was already trying to find a publisher for it. Michael Fraenkel had openly asserted his belief that Henry was "doing something greater than *Ulysses*," and he proposed to have the type set in Bruges and issue the book under his own Carrefour imprint. But Michael was in a bad

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state emotionally. Arguments with Lowenfels and domestic problems had rendered him almost as ineffectual as Osborn; all day long he sat in a cold room too broken and helpless to be able even to make up his mind to go out. Henry hesitated to entrust the book to him; he made up a list of other "little presses." First, however, Anaïs encouraged him to try for commercial publication. She asked her friend Dr. Krans (through whom Henry had been placed at the Lyceé Carnot) to recommend Miller to a Paris literary agent named William Aspenwall Bradley. Wambly Bald had mentioned Bradley in the same column in which he reviewed Henry's first published story, "Mademoiselle Claude," asserting that Bradley "has encouraged and assisted more buds than any other angel we know." Soon, Henry received a cordial letter in which the agent requested that he bring his books around to his office on the rue Saint-Louis in the Ile de la Cité.

Henry left the manuscripts of *Crazy Cock* and *Tropic of Cancer* and waited—not too patiently. Bradley answered within a week: "I have been through both the books now, and should like very much to talk them over with you—especially the *Tropic of Cancer,* which is magnificent." Could Henry come to see him by the end of the week? he inquired. In their first talk, Bradley was discouraging about *Crazy Cock,* but he softened his criticism by persuading Henry that the novel suffered terribly through comparison with the later, richer book: he dismissed *Crazy Cock* in about two minutes. But what would Henry think of seeing *Tropic of Cancer* published in a limited edition of 500 copies at 500 francs apiece by the Obelisk Press? Miller's first reaction was revealing. Though Anaïs was with him, he cried out: "If only June could have been here to enjoy this with me. To think that all we dreamed of is happening and she doesn't even know about it." His second reaction was also curious—a kind of backpedalling loss of confidence exactly at the moment of his triumph. Out of some deep-seated need for self-justification, Henry wanted to force *Crazy Cock* down their throats. *Tropic of Cancer* was not the book he wanted to write, he crazily asserted, not the story he really wanted to tell. He had promised himself in 1927 that he would dedicate himself to writing the story of his life with June. And like a pilgrim of little faith who settles for the first shrine he sees, he had merely written a book recounting his own miserable history. *Crazy Cock* was the story he wanted to tell. If they wanted *Tropic of Cancer* they must take *Crazy Cock* too!

Just when this mood was fully upon him, Henry received a letter from Samuel Putnam, who was in New York. On behalf of Covici-Friede, Publishers, he inquired if Henry had any work to submit;

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Covici had read and liked "Mademoiselle Claude." Now, stubbornly, Henry was enraged that interest should be taken in such a "weak" story, a *jeu d'esprit* done with his left hand. It was humiliating, he decided, to be admired by such buggers. In letters to Lowenfels, Anaïs, Putnam and Emil he ranted and raved. If Americans wanted a book by him now, they would have to take *Crazy Cock*. He wanted it to be a big success in the United States, he said, so that he could take down his pants and show his ass to his countrymen and say: "I'm crapping on it, disowning it. So much for you, America, of thee I sing! That's just the kind of shit you've been eating for the last fifteen years!" Having said all of this, he went on outrageously to propose that either Lowenfels or Putnam should undertake the publication of *Crazy Cock*. Wouldn't it be an apt gesture of the New Instinctivism for him to bring out a book which its author would publically castigate just as the public began to praise it? To Henry's surprise Putnam actually read the manuscript and said he believed it to be "a Covici-Friede book." ("I think he's crazy," Miller told Schnellock—but he did send the book to the Covici-Friede editors.) Typed on the title page was a one-sentence foreword ("Apologies to Michael Fraenkel") and a preface only slightly longer ("Good-bye to the novel, sanity, and good health. Hello angels!"). It was another man, he told Emil, who had written *Crazy Cock*, a man whom Henry now saw as an imposter; and he was defecating on that man too, the hollow American puppet he had left behind.

His fury over American interest in his writing also worked its way into *Tropic of Cancer,* which he expanded now that its publication by Obelisk Press seemed guaranteed. At around the same time *Crazy Cock* was being considered by Covici-Friede, Henry was excising everything but the "fire and dynamite" from *Tropic of Cancer.* Determined to affront readers and to make his book completely unacceptable to the public taste, he added several new sections whose frankness would be almost certain to offend. He also added a contentious preface in which he connected his own world-view of contemporary disease with the surrealist savagery of Luis Buñuel and with Duhamel's violent attack upon American values in *Salavin.* Such a prefatory critical *tour de force,* he felt, would throw the critics overboard or sink their ship. He ruthlessly followed Fraenkel's logic, signed his book "Henry Miller, Pseudonym," and then went one step further and typed a new title page: "'Tropic of Cancer' by Anonymous." Last he vowed that, the fact of publication being merely an incidental occasion in his expression of himself, he would not revise in order to please the public, mollify the censors, or perfect his art. Only his own integrity, he decided, mattered

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to him. He was even willing, if need be, to accept expulsion from France as a consequence of the publication of *Cancer* and to wander the earth like an untouchable.

Jack Kahane might have been dismayed had he known of these resolutions; for as editor and owner of the Obelisk Press, he was drawing up a contract for the publication of *Tropic of Cancer*. By the terms of this document, Miller agreed to give Obelisk Press world rights to publish his book in English in return for a 10 percent royalty and an option on his succeeding two books. That last provision of the contract was far from being an empty gesture. From Kahane's side it indicated faith in this new writer. From Miller's it promised at least a reading for future books. Indeed, as he signed the contract he had already written sixty pages of his next production, a book which he was inevitably calling *Tropic of Capricorn*.

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GOING TO THE MOVIES

Morris Dickstein

BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME

Until recently our interest in Vietnam was at a low ebb. The border war between Vietnam and Cambodia, fought on terrain long familiar to us, caused hardly a murmur of excitement in the press. Our nostalgia for the heady cultural atmosphere of the sixties kept growing, but our attention to the political issues that agitated the period declined drastically. Even at its peak, the Vietnam war caused only a ripple of activity in Hollywood and the publishing industry. Close to half the movies made during World War II dealt in some way with the war, but for filmmakers and publishers Vietnam was marked down as commercial suicide.

Thus our longest and most heavily covered war became in a sense a repressed, taboo subject, and the human realities of the conflict often dropped from view. Between 1942 and 1945 when there was no great division of national opinion, Hollywood set out to sell the war, boost morale, and milk the combat of action, thrill, and sentiment. At the same time a whole generation of American writers went into combat with dreams of writing the Great American Novel; later, in the sixties, I suspect the Mailers and Joneses kept their student deferments, burned their draft cards, or fled to Canada.

Even during the less popular Korean war Hollywood geared up to do its duty and make some dollars. The war was untimely, as Hollywood had just entered a new cycle of World War II movies with *Battleground* and *The Sands of Iwo Jima* in 1949. I remember how much I loved those movies as a child, what fine distinctions I made between anti-Jap and anti-Nazi films, how disappointed I was when

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they gave way to grim and hollow Korean stories. The military still lavished its cooperation, but the old simple faith just wasn't there; the serpent of ambiguity had entered the garden of gung-ho innocence.

By the time of Vietnam that measure of strain had grown into a morass of doubt. Still, what's surprising is not that Hollywood did not "face up" to the war—how often has it faced up to anything serious and difficult?—but that it didn't do more to try and sell it. Apart from John Wayne's version of *The Green Berets* (1968), which had almost enough Pentagon help to make it an official production, the mood of national agitation was deflected onto other times and settings, such as Mexico (in films like *The Wild Bunch*, 1969), Korea (in *M*A*S*H*, 1970), domestic crime, or the old standby, World War II (in George C. Scott's complex, ambivalent portrayal in *Patton*, 1970).

If Hollywood averted its eyes from Southeast Asia it was not for want of interest or ideas. As Julian Smith spells it out in his aptly titled book *Looking Away: Hollywood and Vietnam* (1975), "The war probably inspired a higher percentage of aborted projects than any other issue confronting Hollywood." Smith also points out that besides *The Green Berets* there have been several dozen films dealing marginally with the war. Many are cheap exploitation flicks centering on Vietnam veterans, the walking wounded, who are treated as powder kegs of latent psychosis and violence. These men rarely show any physical injuries—that might prove depressing—but their psychic scars are used to justify vast explosions of gore and carnage. Smith describes this as "the growing popularity of the Vietvet as a gimmick for passing off violence as social commentary."

Meanwhile, back in real life, thousands of maimed men home from the war had dropped out of the national consciousness; everyone was tired of Vietnam, ready to put it out of mind. All that's been written by and about the Vietnam returnees emphasizes the lack of welcome, the poor job prospects, the degree of dislocation and disaffection (*No Victory Parades*, one book is called). The vets are living reminders of an ugly and unpopular war, where even bravery and acts of courage lost the halo of heroism. Yet suddenly the movie industry is betting large sums that the Vietnam taboo can be lifted. Five years after the withdrawal of American forces, three years after the fall of Saigon, at least half a dozen major films will be released this year, including Francis Ford Coppola's long-awaited, ill-fated *Apocalypse Now* (loosely based on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*). The kind of resistance they may encounter I sensed in myself—a twinge of horror at the invitation to see some of these films and examine what they have to

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tell us. One of these films, Sydney J. Furie's *The Boys in Company C*, justified my recalcitrance; it offered a model of how *not* to make a film about the Vietnam war. The movie is a mixture of boot-camp realism, service comedy, combat gore, and cute stereotypes à la *Happy Days*. Were it not for another recent film, Hal Ashby's *Coming Home*, it would be enough to put the subject of Vietnam under wraps for another decade.

Coming Home deals with Vietnam by not dealing with it, by taking it on obliquely. It contains no combat or atrocity footage; Vietnam remains an unseen presence, a place men fly off to or return from, sometimes in a box, never the same. The film belongs not among the war pictures but among the homecoming movies, especially those that deal with the rehabilitation of badly damaged veterans. These include Delmer Daves's *Pride of the Marines* (1945), in which John Garfield plays a blinded war-hero, William Wyler's celebrated film *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), which traces the fortunes of three returning soldiers, and especially Fred Zinnemann's *The Men* (1950), a harsh and powerful film, in which Marlon Brando made his screen debut as a sullen paraplegic who rejects life and resists all rehabilitation.

Much of the first half of *Coming Home* takes place in a California V.A. hospital in the months following the 1968 Tet offensive, scenes strongly reminiscent of *The Men*. But Jon Voight's performance in the Brando role is all his own, a fine mixture of macho and vulnerability, anger and tenderness. Just as Teresa Wright in *The Men* tried to pierce the shell of Brando's depression and self-loathing, Jane Fonda plays a married woman who draws Voight out of his isolation and bitterness. They have an unexpected love affair, in which Fonda impersonates a prim middle-American woman whose husband, a Marine Corps captain (played by Bruce Dern), has himself just gone off to Vietnam.

According to producer Jerome Hellman, who spent four years on the project, the impulse to make the film originated five years ago with Fonda, who had been working with wounded and antiwar veterans. Unlike many on the American left Fonda evidently took as much interest in our own casualties as in those of the Vietnamese. Playing an officer's wife who volunteers for hospital work and falls in love with a crippled vet, Fonda is able both to draw attention to the human aftermath of the war and to portray the growth of personality in a woman who is on her own for the first time. The movie tries hard not to condescend to this middle-American woman and her world. But playing against type and against her public image, Fonda remains a bit

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stiff, a little outside her part as if encased in lacquer, like her bouffant hairdo. Even when she lets her hair down and becomes the Jane we all know, this woman remains a spectator in her own life, standing by helpless and unfocused when her two men finally confront each other.

There's no political dimension to the war in this script. The movies, graced with those larger-than-life figures on the screen, are inevitably a personalizing medium, and Jon Voight's role simply has more personal resonance and shading than Fonda's. This is especially true early in the film, in the hospital scenes, where Voight plays a sarcastic and explosive man. It's too bad we see so little of this side of him later in the film; when he leaves the hospital a touch of the saint and hero settles over him, and his anger is channeled healthfully into love and protest—a perfect sixties combination. Voight's situation goes beyond the issue of Vietnam and the veteran. As a cripple he is plagued by a sense of helplessness and inadequacy, embittered by inadequate care and official neglect, and he feels that others view him as an object, a case. "Is this invite-a-gimp-to-dinner night?" he asks Fonda, after she reaches out to him.

Unfortunately the script doesn't extend this kind of understanding to the poor husband, who is off in Vietnam while the romance flowers. He is not only sexist but commonplace in every way, an embodiment of the older values Voight and Fonda leave behind. He returns home after an absurdly unheroic mishap—he shoots himself in the leg—and though the film would like to blame his freak-out on what he has seen in Vietnam, we can't help but notice that it's actually his wife's infidelity that pushes him over the edge. Both Hellman and director Hal Ashby told me they played with many different ways of finishing the husband off (including a violent public blow-up, which they wisely abandoned), but the idealized love affair and the arbitrary treatment of the husband account for the let-down of the later part of the film. *Coming Home* includes an unusual and powerful sex scene that for once makes perfect dramatic sense; in the light of Voight's disability and Fonda's inhibition this had to be a crucial moment. But as the romance develops, Vietnam recedes and Hollywood takes over. The hospital part of the film is more fresh and ambitious, and tackles a larger subject, with more visual variety, than anything that happens to the characters in the outside world.

The hospital scenes are a lesson in how to manage sombre material without being gloomy or sadistic. (This wasn't the case with *The Men*, a commercial failure, where Brando's "method" performance is so discomforting that we have the urge to cut and run.) In a

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low-key documentary style Ashby shows the men talking, playing, griping, and joking as well as suffering. This lightens the mood and gives it exceptional authenticity. From rap sessions to wheelchair olympics to youthful suicide, the world of the hospital brings the war home to us with gritty immediacy, not as an abstract horror or prize-winning photograph.

The publishing world too has recently given unusual acclaim and attention to good books of reportage and reflection like Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* and Michael Herr's *Dispatches*. Significantly, these books have also begun to sell; but will the larger, more miscellaneous movie audience, which is a better sample of the popular mind, buy what Hollywood now has to offer? If the public accepts *Coming Home* it will be buying more than the memory of Vietnam and its living wounded; it will be buying back a piece of the sixties.

The director told me in an interview that he, like so many others, feels challenged to recapture something of the elusive character of the sixties, and especially the crucial year 1968, difficult as that may be. (The soundtrack is an anthology of well-known sixties rock numbers, but it certainly doesn't help that the songs are laid down in a way that comments all too broadly on moments of the action.) Though the lyrics of the Rolling Stones remain quite extraneous, Vietnam is as integral to *Coming Home* as Richard Nixon's 1968 presidential campaign was marginal to *Shampoo*, a good sex comedy which scarcely earned such touches of political significance. Ashby's work has always been off-beat and individual, as far back as his early black comedy *Harold and Maude*, but it has also grown more deeply political as American culture in the seventies has become ever less so. His last film, *Bound for Glory*, was a lovingly detailed portrait of troubador Woody Guthrie in the *Grapes of Wrath* world of the thirties. It was a beautiful and self-denying movie, so determined to present Woody as an exemplary figure—drifter, loner, individualist (a creature of the sixties, really, not the thirties)—that it included precious little of what we most wanted, which was his music.

The same theme of casual, rebellious masculine individuality is at the heart of Jon Voight's role in *Coming Home*. When Voight's inchoate feelings about the war begin to surface he joins no movement, tells no one, but quietly chains himself to the gate of a Marine Corps post in a one-man rebellion. Here we can see the difference between *Coming Home* and the forties films on which it's modeled. In *The Men* and *The Best Years of Our Lives*, the veteran has been marked off and separated by his experiences; the goal is reconciliation, the reintegra-

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tion of the individual, for all his disabilities, into the social framework. For the veteran in *Coming Home* the challenge is the opposite: to cut himself off from the habits of mind, the social consensus, that sent him off to war in the first place. Modest, flawed, even a little compromised by box-office conventions, the film is nevertheless a serious act of witness, made by obsessed people with long memories and a determined conscience, a refusal to forget. This is what *Coming Home* finally means: bringing the war home. For once the Hollywood left has done itself proud.

It's peculiarly apt that Hollywood should take note of changing national attitudes, for it contributes as much to the social consensus as any other American institution. The minds of our troops in Vietnam were filled with images from war movies; the name that most recurs in all their recollections is John Wayne, not for *The Green Berets*, merely a ghost of his earlier films, but for his cowboy movies and World War II heroics. Part of the continual shock of the war was its difference from what war looked like in the movies. "This ain't the fucking movies over here, you know," a hardened sergeant tells Michael Herr early on in *Dispatches*. But when Herr himself looks for an image of the kind of phantasmagoric war it is, he can only describe it as "life-as-movie, war-as-(war) movie, war-as-life." No war film has yet developed the equivalent of Herr's agitated, hallucinatory prose, meant to depict a nerve-wracking conflict with no front and little respite, in which "real sleep was at a premium. . . . Mostly what you had was the agitated side of half-sleep, you thought you were sleeping but you were really just waiting. Night sweats, harsh functionings of consciousness, drifting in and out of your head. . . . "Perhaps it's too easy for a film like *Coming Home* to assume that if you've been to Vietnam you're likely to come back maimed or deeply disturbed; the evidence is there in books like Herr's, where the danger of cracking up is never far off, but the film ought to show what it merely assumes, what it takes our own knowledge of the war to fill in.

Still, the film is as impressive for what it does not do as for what it does: for its refusal to exploit the veteran or turn him into a metaphor for anything but the wretched war itself, for its avoidance of stock images of violence at home or in Vietnam, for its unwillingness to solicit an easy response. Arthur Penn, who kicked off the current cycle of movie violence with *Bonnie and Clyde* in 1967, said several years ago, "I don't believe the war in Vietnam can be treated in a 'popular film.' We have no capacity to confront events of that enormity head on." On the other hand, Paul Schrader, the author of *Taxi Driver* and

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of an even more violent script about a Vietnam vet called *Rolling Thunder*, wrote that "the war is still too close to most Americans for them sufficiently to detach themselves. . . . One must work in metaphors *for the moment*. . . . Give it another five years, though, maybe less, and films will be set in Vietnam."

Schrader's prediction has come true to the minute. But on the basis of *Coming Home* it would be wrong to attribute Hollywood's sudden interest in Vietnam solely to the healing passage of time. True, the agonies of war and the furies of domestic division have abated; so have the energies of conscience and protest which were the war's only decent by-product. The makers of *Coming Home* had no interest in exploiting this calm, or using Vietnam itself as the setting for a good old-fashioned movie yarn. What clearly agitated them is the silence itself, the graveyard calm, the mood of national forgetfulness that is one of the hallmarks of the seventies. Our callous treatment of the unwelcome veteran is part of our avoidance of the memory of the war itself, and we may be condemned to repeat it unless we're willing finally to face it. I don't know whether *Coming Home* and its successors point toward a greater national willingness to come to terms with Vietnam and the legacy of the sixties, nor can I guess how the public will take to these films. But the fact that at long last they're being made—and in the case of *Coming Home*, made well—can only be taken as a healthy symptom of the return of the repressed.

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MISREADING BLOOM

WALLACE STEVENS: THE POEMS OF OUR CLIMATE. By Harold Bloom. Cornell University Press. $17.50.

Harold Bloom's *The Poems of Our Climate* is probably the best book on Stevens, though this isn't high praise. Too quirky to be anything like "definitive," it nevertheless develops a way of considering Stevens's poetry which, seen clear of Bloom's particular critical system and its attendant terminology, should open the way at last for a general assimilation of Stevens's essential importance. Stevens is a psychological poet in the sense that his poems are the record of the movement of a mind. His is not a poetry of thought but of how we think. Its movement is typically from conflict to resolution which breaks down into conflict again. The poet is a man whose mind is never made up: "It can never be satisfied, the mind, never." If Stevens's poems may be said to have a structure, it is fundamentally the structure of the poet's mind as it is realized in the act of improvisation. Hence on the one hand the loose, limitless variations-on-a-theme form, as in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" or "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," and on the other, the symmetrical but arbitrary forms, as in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," which serve as a frame within which to improvise. As opposed to the didactic or philosophic, this poetry's end is not proof but conviction, or persuasion as in rhetoric, except that it is as if Stevens were trying to persuade himself; its goal is not to demonstrate truth but to effect resolution. It does not attempt to assert fact, but rather seeks to adjust belief to fact, to bring about that "agreement with reality believed for a time to be true" that Stevens conceives to be poetic truth. In other words, its area of operation is not that of doctrine, but of psychology. That is why Stevens can write, "It is the belief and not the god that counts," and again, "In the long run the truth does not matter."

Through ingenious use of the terminology peculiar to his criticism—no matter how tortuous—Bloom captures this basic mode

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and movement of Stevens's poetry and expounds it with subtle argument, rich detail, and prodigious learning. The greatest contribution of the book is to ground this approach thoroughly in literary tradition and intellectual history. Bloom's reading recognizes and contains the discursive material in the poetry. His Stevens is not a poet of ideas, a philosophical poet. On the contrary, Bloom speaks of "the long tradition of the polemic of philosophy against poetry, in which rhetoric has been at once the fought-over field and the weapons depot for both sides." It is not the epistemological, "concept-thinking" rhetoric of the philosophers through which Stevens can be understood. Rather we must understand Stevens in terms of a persuasive, antithetical rhetoric in the sophistic tradition. Bloom speaks of Gorgias as "a poet leading souls through incantation to the relativity of all truth, and doing this through an antithetical style, one which offered contrasts and alternatives for every definition ventured, in contrast to the Socratic mode of arriving at supposedly absolute truth." This, it seems to me, captures the tone of Stevens precisely. Such a rhetoric is concerned with emotional survival rather than truth, and so Bloom calls for a revivification of "the ancient identity between rhetoric and psychology," whose arena would be the reader's internal discourse, as well as the poet's.

I am, of course, misreading Bloom, and leaving out a great deal of his thesis. But this seems to me what is seminal in his stance with regard to Stevens, from which one might move in many different directions. It should also be noted that, as Denis Donoghue points out in his admirably balanced review in *The New York Review of Books*, the strong focus which Bloom's full critical apparatus provides on some aspects of Stevens's work also inhibits investigation of other aspects which do not happen to be relevant to Bloom's theories. This favors my own sense that Bloom is most useful as a critic if one doesn't take him seriously, a remark which I don't intend to be demeaning. On the contrary, there is an element of play in Bloom's writing which keeps it on the edge of balance and poses a tone of liveliness and surprise against its more ponderous qualities. Bloom's criticism is, like Stevens's poetry, itself the record of a mind in motion. It is an antithetical criticism, sophistic, full of paradox and unexpected turns. It comprises, in fact, what Bloom calls for in the course of his argument, that is, a "diachronic rhetoric." One therefore cannot take any one phase or term in Bloom's evolving theory with absolute seriousness. What Bloom is presenting to us is the intriguing example of a critical intelligence in process of thinking like a poetic intelli-

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gence. This makes many critical widows wince. Bloom means to make them wince. He intends to be outrageous and he is. Bloom is a provocateur. He is employing a kind of *patacriticism* to move literary commentary, especially academic literary commentary, out of the realm of systematic "concept-thinking" into that of contingency and the progressive qualification of relativism. There is no such thing as truth. But if there is no such thing as truth, perhaps there is no such thing as theory. In fact, Bloom's purpose is to return criticism from systematic theory to practical criticism. And yet, his own theoretical system is pervasive and heavy handed and constantly gets in the way of his practical criticism. And yet, if his theory is consistent it should evolve in the direction of self-destruction, theory providing an escape from theory. And yet, Bloom does not mean to be consistent. And yet, and yet, and yet. Which is the point.

As a result of these contradictions, what we are left with in this book is frequently apt theory and frequently inept Stevens explication. When you read Bloom reading Stevens's poems you get Bloom. If you want Bloom it's fine; if you want Stevens it's not so good. When a poem happens to connect with one of Bloom's abiding concerns the reading is often brilliant, as when he finds an opportunity to establish Stevens firmly in the context of American romanticism. If a poem does not happen to relate to one of those concerns, Bloom misreads it. Or he loses interest. Finally, his reading of Stevens makes one wonder which side, in the battle of philosophy against poetry, Bloom is really on.

RONALD SUKENICK

A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

THE LIFE OF BERTRAND RUSSELL. By Ronald W. Clark. Alfred A. Knopf. $17.50.

Whatever criticisms may be brought against Mr. Clark's life of Bertrand Russell for its lack of taste or discernment, he has unquestionably performed a service in assembling a great many facts about Russell and weaving them into a readable narrative. The story follows the lines laid down by Russell himself in his autobiographical

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writings and includes, as they do, many of the anecdotes Russell put into currency in his later years. For readers whose interest lies in Russell's thought this approach has a grave disadvantage. They are only allowed to see Russell's problems at the crucial period, the beginning of this century, through the eyes of the later Russell of the *Autobiography* and *My Philosophical Development*. But this could not have been otherwise, since Mr. Clark is not himself a philosopher or independent thinker but a professional biographer who has already written extensively on the lives of famous men of science, including Einstein, Tizard, and J.B.S. Haldane. And although Mr. Clark does what he can to explain Russell's work in mathematics, logic, and general philosophy to the lay reader, he does not and cannot compete with writers like A.J. Ayer or David Pears as an exponent of Russell's thought.

Clark's purpose seems to be to give as full an account as possible of the private life of a famous and notorious public figure who lived for nearly a century and in various ways impinged on most of the celebrities and major historical events of his time. The new material Mr. Clark has been able to use, taken from the vast Russell archives at McMaster University in Ontario, does not substantially alter the self-portrait Russell wished to leave to posterity. It is very much in line with the account of him, written from the point of view of a sympathetic admirer, in Alan Wood's excellent if brief study, *Bertrand Russell: the Passionate Sceptic*. What it does add is much fuller documentation of Russell's relations with women. The biographer has drawn heavily on Russell's copious correspondence with Lady Ottoline Morrell, together with his private journal dealing with the collapse of his first marriage, and a long unpublished manuscript written by Lady Constance Malleson. Certainly anyone who wants to know more about Russell's wives and mistresses will find his wishes amply gratified. But given that much of the book has only this kind of interest, and given the necessarily perfunctory and external character of Mr. Clark's dealings with a philosopher who has been called the greatest logician since Aristotle, what interest has it for the serious reader? It is tempting to say, not very much.

But to say only that would be unjust. This book is not a hack production. It is obviously the result of much labor, based on careful research. It is scrupulously documented, and many of Russell's fantasized accounts of people and events are corrected. The bibliography is good and the index admirable. Some reviewers have complained of the style, and I must admit that I found it sometimes disagreeable,

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especially in the earlier chapters. Here is a random sample:

> For Russell, whose battened-down youth was followed by a buttoned-up marriage, two ghosts which gibbered over his shoulder down the years, much emotion demanded much concealment.

Such flourishes seem all the more unfortunate when one remembers Russell's own pellucid style. If, contrary to his own expectations, Russell is still alive somewhere, no more exquisite purgatory could be devised for him than to have to listen to some of this prose. But as the book goes on either the style improves (though it never becomes distinguished) or one ceases to notice it because one is engrossed in the story.

The real trouble with the book, if it is to be judged by serious standards, is that the biographer's purpose is not fully clear. We may infer from his epigraph, which quotes a letter of Russell's to Ottoline Morrell in 1918, that his aim is to present everything he can find out about Bertrand Russell with the utmost fullness and candor, in the conviction that this can only redound, on the whole, to Russell's credit and confirm the reader in the opinion that we have here the life of a great and good, though far from faultless, human being. What we are to be given is not a hagiography but a monument to what Russell himself calls in the quoted letter "the robustness of truth." The trouble is that Mr. Clark does not seem to have adequately wrestled with the difficult problem of just what the truth is in many of the delicate matters he is dealing with. It is fair to say that he does quote the adverse or gravely qualifying judgments passed on Russell by other intellectual aristocrats who knew him. He gives us George Santayana's reservations about the "many-sided fanatic," D.H. Lawrence on Russell's "vital inexperience" and "immaturity," Beatrice Webb's edged comments on the "frowsy, cynical, unhealthy personage" of Russell's middle years, so sad a contrast to the ardent purity of the passionate young Shelley-like seeker for truth she had once known. But none of this seems to start a debate in Mr. Clark's mind about the character of the man he offers for our contemplation. Thus he insists again and again on Russell's passionate commitment to the search for truth.

But what about Russell's popular books and public utterances—some of which have to meet, not only the charge of flippancy, but of irresponsibility and unscrupulousness? And did Russell's human relationships show him as egotistical and predatory? Were some of the noble attitudes he struck at least in part attitudinizings? The point is not, of course, that these suspicions are correct. It is not necessary to

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abandon the image of Russell as the disinterested campaigner for human betterment—and at the end, in the Ban-the-Bomb days, for mere human survival. And even if there is something true in the adverse view of Russell's life and work, it need not be merely condemnatory. Russell's lonely and affection-starved childhood, the hothouse atmosphere of his education, the serious physical and nervous illness of his maturity, not to speak of later difficulties—all these would have to be taken into account. But a satisfactory discussion of Russell would have to bring out more clearly that he is open to criticism from a point of view quite different from that of the bigots who prevented his appointment at the City College of New York.

To put it another way: the serious student of Russell must sooner or later confront and examine closely the rhetorical side of Russell's writing, as in *The Free Man's Worship* (as it was originally called). That famous declaration brings to mind the distinction drawn by Trilling between sincerity and authenticity. There is something that does not ring true about it. And though it may be unfair to use a man's love letters against him, the same must be said about many passages from them quoted by Mr. Clark. No doubt Russell was quite sincere in claiming that he experienced heights of ecstasy and depths of despair, of rapture and bitterness. But there is something in his way of writing about them that chills rather than warms. It is not enough to show, as Mr. Clark does, that the popular image of him as a cynical rationalist or eighteenth century abbé is a caricature. That Bertrand Russell, with all his dazzling gifts, was not a whole man, that in some important regions he lacked self-knowledge—this has been the verdict towards which Russell's most severe and serious critics have inclined. Mr. Clark's treatment would have been more arresting if he had given us more help to investigate its justice.

It is on the public Russell that this particular biographer is most illuminating, and he writes well on the shifts and complexities of Russell's attitudes to public affairs. He gives much consideration, for example, to the disputed question of whether Russell advocated a preventive war against the Soviet Union after World War II, and whether he was altogether candid afterwards about what policy he had actually recommended at that time. Mr. Clark discusses also at great but not unnecessary length Russell's relationship is his later years with Ralph Schoenman—Russell's left-hand man, as a British journalist called him. He prints a long memorandum on the character and conduct of Schoenman, dictated by Russell in 1969, which cannot but excite our admiration for the incisive prose and penetrating analysis of

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another personality that Russell could still command at so advanced an age. The later chapters of Mr. Clark's book have an adventitious advantage over those dealing, for example, with Russell's relationships at Cambridge, or pacifism in World War I, or travels in Russia and China, or educational experiments. In them, he is not merely expanding Russell's own account but writing his own history of the great man's life and times. And the quality of his own style and thought in these chapters improves so much that it sets one wondering about the book he could have given us if he had written the earlier parts with the same degree of independence.

But thinking over the book as it is I cannot say that the significance and personality of Russell have been greatly clarified for me by reading it. It is a comprehensive account of Russell's *vie amoureuse* and his intellectual, emotional, and moral vicissitudes generally, but it is all too superficial. Figures like Wittgenstein, D.H. Lawrence, or T.S. Eliot appear in their due place in the story without its ever being clear what essentially attracted Russell to them. There is no depth in the treatment of these men either as people or as minds, so that there is no real understanding of the reason why his strong infatuation turned to strong dislike, or at least estrangement, nor of why they came to turn against Russell. The treatment of these important episodes is casual, even careless, of a piece with Mr. Clark's mistaken belief that there is something called "the High Anglican Church" to which Eliot was converted.

At this point, however, the reviewer's occupational ingratitude must be chastened by this thought: the qualifications of the ideal or even the adequate biographer of Russell are so formidable that one cannot believe such a paragon would think the job worth his while. For he would need to combine the gifts of a distinguished logician, philosopher, novelist, and historian, as well as to possess the industriousness and professional skill that the present biographer undoubtedly commands. In short, he would be so wise and profound a man that he might do better to emulate Russell—and perhaps with more success—in trying to set the world to rights.

All the same, one could imagine a study of Russell which achieved more by standing back a little from the biographical details, colorful as these are, and reflecting rather more deeply on some general themes that the study of Russell's life and work brings to mind. One of these might be the contrast between the sincere and the authentic which I have already mentioned. And here a writer with a more literary bias than Mr. Clark's might have something to offer. For Russell presents a

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literary problem. He is without doubt a first-rate writer, and it is a pity that academic "Eng. Lit." ignores him.

Some of his books are still as immediately relevant as they ever were, like *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*, though it was published as long ago as 1920. And *The Problems of Philosophy*, which Russell used to refer to as his "shilling shocker," remains the best possible introduction to philosophy as Russell conceived it. Even the *History of Western Philosophy*, whatever its defects, is often very good reading. Yet just as it seems to be agreed by philosophers that (leaving pure logic and mathematics out of it) Russell wrote no philosophical masterpiece and that apart from their historical importance, his books survive only in pages and paragraphs, so in the realm of belles-lettres there is nothing of Russell's that stands by itself as a classic, no equivalent of *Candide*. His essays and popular books, such as *Marriage and Morals*, *The Conquest of Happiness*, etc., are always sparkling and witty, often wise (and unwise), but this generation may conclude that they have served their turn and that what good or bad they might do has now been done. Today Russell writing on sex is distinctly anaphrodisiac, and a literary treatment of Russell (none seems to exist) might throw some light on why this is so.

But this kind of commentary would be unsatisfactory if it did not go deeper than questions of style. And to go deeper something more than sound literary judgment is required; a real philosophical interest is essential. For the profoundest general theme which the student of Russell has to tackle is the relation between the problems of a philosopher as a philosopher and more general human problems. And in Russell's case this theme is closely linked with the question, clearly a living one, whether there is anything at all tragic about him—apart from the sense in which every human being's life can be seen as tragic—and comic also. Russell often assures his readers, as he assured his mistresses, that he was a tormented soul, but do we always believe it? It seems to me that if there ever was a tragic experience for him it is to be looked for in the Russell of the years before *Principia Mathematica*, in the period of the breakdown of his first marriage. If we could be clear about just what Russell's philosophical problems really were, at the time when his genius was at its zenith—and they may well not have coincided with his later account of them—it might be possible to become clearer about his human problems also and their relation to the others. Although Mr. Clark may supply some materials for a critique at this level, he has himself done nothing to give us one.

W.W. ROBSON

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STRUCTURALIST PSYCHOANALYSIS

ÉCRITS. By Jacques Lacan. Norton. $16.75.

When Jacques Lacan's *Écrits*, made up of lectures delivered between 1948 and 1961, first appeared in France, there was little interest in it in this country. But with the scramble for new forms of therapy, even some American analysts have turned to Lacan, possibly to jazz up the appeal of psychoanalysis and to "return to the real Freud"—a return that increasingly locates psychoanalysis in language and linguistics. Freud himself, I believe, would find Lacan unintelligible. He is dazzling, dense, and elusive; only a neo-Hegelian graduate from the École Normale could claim to "understand" his increasingly wide-ranging allusions and free associations. To pragmatic Americans, Lacan's insistence that *méconnaissance* is always part of *connaissance*, that to "understand" him would be to reify and to simplify him, presents a nearly insurmountable problem.

Yet Alan Sheridan's translation, which begins with a lucid glossary of many Lacanianisms, makes him more comprehensible; it is confined to the purely psychoanalytic contributions, and omits Lacan's more flamboyant public lectures, his television performances, and his structuralist literary criticism. These nine earlier lectures to psychoanalysts (later ones increasingly speak to admiring disciples) introduce us to Lacan's psychoanalytic theories on language, "aggressivity," psychosis, desire, etc., and stress the importance of the analyst's personal talent over his training.

Still, the rift between French and American Freudians is more fundamental and goes far beyond the ostensible controversy over training. For Lacan claims that Saussurean structural linguistics (the study of language as *Gestalteneinheit*, as a self-sufficient system that is both complete and historical at every moment) can restore the excitement and originality of Freud's texts. Thus, distinctions between *langue* (language system) and *parole* (individual speech) and the relation between them, between the phonemic (recognized) levels of speech and the abstract systems of signs (these in turn have their own dual aspects of concept and sound image) are to help our understanding of Freud. It is the superimposition of these structural dichotomies on psychoanalysis, itself full of internal contradictions, that makes

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Lacan so abstruse. Yet the very plethora of ambiguities—ambiguities he arranges according to linguistic oppositions and transformations—"allows" him to justify his free associations as science. In Paris, where structuralism is still a powerful force—in Lévi-Strauss's anthropology, Barthes's literary criticism, Althusser's Marxism—his lectures continue to be mobbed. For he promises, ultimately, to give us the answers to our existential dilemmas, to uncover the sources of our conscious and unconscious thought and our social productions. And the structuralist hegemony in France enhances Lacan's status; it seems as powerful as the hegemony of the Americans within the International Psychoanalytic Association, which Lacan so violently condemned in 1949 and 1952.

This legitimation of psychoanalysis through linguistics is in sharp contrast to our "conventional" psychoanalysis, which is tied to biology and follows the developmental model Freud derived from the natural sciences and from his work in neurophysiology. American psychoanalysts who trace their descent to Freud's own couch try to validate their clinical observations through objective methods, if only because empirical quantification is our own scientific mode—the road to professional respectability. By 1924 American psychoanalysis had been almost completely medicalized to "save" it from impostors through technical restrictions—restrictions that nevertheless engendered various neo- and anti-Freudian therapies. So when Lacan began to insist that psychoanalysis must be "rescued from medicalization in order to regain its status as a science," he was as chauvinistic and parochial as the American Freudians appeared to be to the French after WWII, when they insisted on their own lengthy methods of training, etc. Many French analysts broke away from the International Psychoanalytic Association after Lacan stated publicly that American Freudians live by "rules, techniques, recipes and clichés that amount to a formal structure which by itself inhibits free association and subverts the psychoanalytic process."

Lacan, of course, was not the first Freudian to be excommunicated. Freud himself, we recall, had his rifts with Adler, Jung, and Reich; in the American movement there had been a whole series of secessions and ousters. But Lacan seemed to be particularly overt and provocative in his rejection of a set "fifty-minute" hour, in his insistence on a flexible or discretionary hour that might last only a few minutes, and in his use of all sorts of other "unethical" and unacceptable techniques. (This also caused subsequent splits in the French contingent.)

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His capricious insistence that psychoanalysis must remain unstructured was already evident in his original theoretical contribution on the *mirror image* (1932), where he emphasizes that a child's first glimpse and apprehension of itself in the mirror (between six and eighteen months) is of fundamental psychological importance. This event is said to be the child's initial awareness of himself as a biological organism at a time when he cannot yet verbalize or make sense of this experience.

> The *mirror image* situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming into being of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as *I* his discordance with his own reality.

In this fixed and fleeting "drama," the individual is said to anticipate himself biologically, to be cognizant of both the "mental permanence" and the alienation of the *I*, to establish a relation between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*. Lacan states that this fragmented body image can manifest itself in analysands' dreams, through aggressive disintegration of the individual, or in schizoid and spasmodic symptoms of hysteria.

Although this explanation appears to remain within the classical Freudian tradition, the very notion that a preordained event can be so crucial and yet so accidental seems to blur the painstaking empirical studies of early childhood development by American Freudians. *Their* use of morphemes and phonemes, for instance, is likely to focus on maturational factors and variations, or on the influence of language in the resolution of the Oedipus complex in a specific child. More recently, Lacan's mirroring has become less concrete—a part of the metaphorical discourse with the world. In the 1949 version of the *mirror stage*—the first chapter in the English *Écrits*—he states:

> On the mental plane we find realized the structures of fortified works, the metaphor of which arises spontaneously, as if issuing from the symptoms themselves, to designate the mechanisms of obsessional neurosis—inversion, isolation, reduplication, cancellation and displacement.

With this insertion of linguistics, Lacan "legitimately" allows his imagination to take over. The complexities multiply as he begins to elaborate on the concept of the mirror stage by zeroing in on the

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moment at which it ends. For that is when identification with "the *imago* of the counterpart and the drama of primordial jealousy" determines the formation of the *I* and the resolution of the Oedipus complex. "Primary narcissism by which analytic doctrine designates the libidinal investment characteristics," awareness of separation from the Other (a concept Lacan always lets his audience define for itself), and semantic latencies (non-verbalized thought associations) are allegedly invested in this moment—"with all the ambivalences and dynamic oppositions of the Oedipal complex." Lacan's idea of the existence of "separate libidos of language and of sexuality" legitimates the centrality of language and speech in psychoanalysis itself. (The notion of separate and interacting libidos is even more difficult to prove than the existence of a single libido.) The skeptic is "convinced" by frequent restatements of linguistic and Freudian truths, such as "the unconscious is not merely the seat of the instincts"; "the subject's speech makes its entrance into language and its structure at a certain point in his mental development and cultural experience"; "every spoken word is full of meaning . . . its utterance is rooted in a specific context." Although these truisms reaffirm the Oedipal matrix and the inexhaustibility of the unconscious, the babel of internal ambiguities multiples further through Lacan's "discourse with the Other."

Lacan locates this discourse in the speech of the patient, in the analyst's reply or his silence (he is the Other), and in the reality the patient will eventually ascribe to it. When he descends from lofty generalizations to psychoanalytic practice, he addresses himself to clinical techniques, to the importance of *Durcharbeiten*, or to the danger of intellectualizing. At times, he pays homage to Anna Freud, but he is closer to Melanie Klein, whose notion of the formation of the *imago* in the womb as the original *Urbild* of the superego, for example, supports his own theories. But his clinical observations easily slip back into global generalizations. "Aggressivity in psychoanalysis" can move from a patient's obsessive phantasies through Lacan's own free associations, to become but a microcosm of the history of civilization, as the ruminations on biology, mythology and animal psychology eventually "open up to the being of nothingness," to Sartrean philosophy. So there are wide gaps between Lacan's lectures on *psychanalyse* and *la chose Freudienne*, and his clinical experience.

Still, Lacan's unique flair has created excitement—by breeding both disciples and dissidents. The resulting polemics add to Lacan's visibility and popularity. As the leader of the current psychoanalytic cult, he turns the search for the self into a pleasurable process, as if

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the work of the diligent analysand could be joined to the pleasure principle. Both his brilliance and his banality mediate Lacan's discourse with the Other, so that the Freudian emphasis on unconscious guilt and on the painful discovery of the Oedipal trauma are forgotten. Because "the unconscious is structured like a language," the victory of the ego over the id seems assured; the id, or *ça*, talks for Lacan, while for Freud it was, on the contrary, irrational, and tended to "act out."

Lacan's appeal, I believe, does not derive from his infinite structuralist dichotomies, or from the promise to turn the unconscious into the conscious, but rather from declarations to large audiences that his own unconscious is analyzable by them, that he is their peer in a common enterprise. This encourages pop psychoanalysis as well as some sort of mass transference. And his audacity and exhibitionism add verve to the psychoanalytic encounter. In 1968 he abandoned "the couch for the street"; he forgot the students' weak superegos and instead entered into a dialogue with them.

Such "narcissistic" public performances have in the past widened the gap between Lacan and the American Freudians, who trade on their dignity, distance, and restraint. But now, perhaps the realization that their aloofness is counterproductive to psychoanalysis itself makes them more willing to acknowledge Lacan's existence. Along with Piaget he might account for their increasing focus on language during the development of the child. The very complications of linguistic psychoanalysis may discredit some of our more simpleminded fads. Thus Lacan may indirectly boost American psychoanalysis, although I doubt that this "French Freud," whom the Parisians have to some extent already replaced with "Anti-Oedipus," will ever establish his practice in America.

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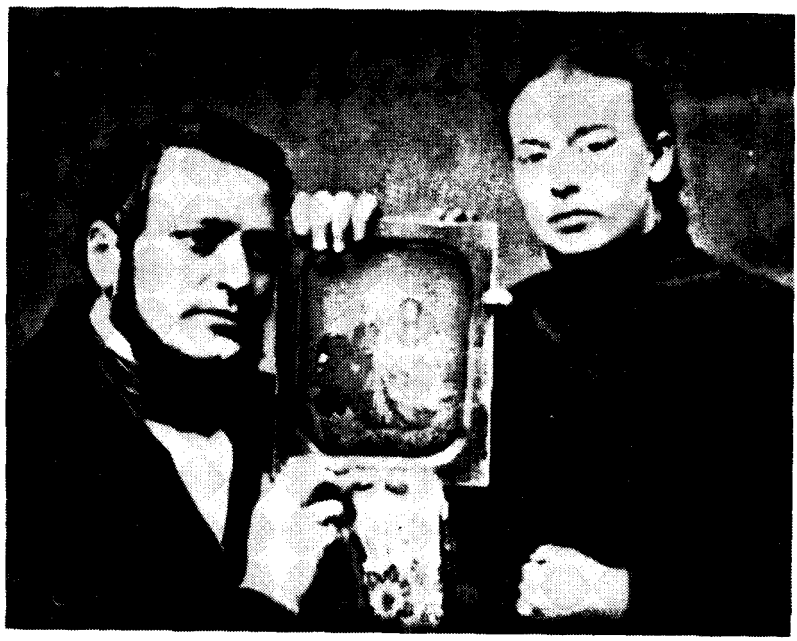

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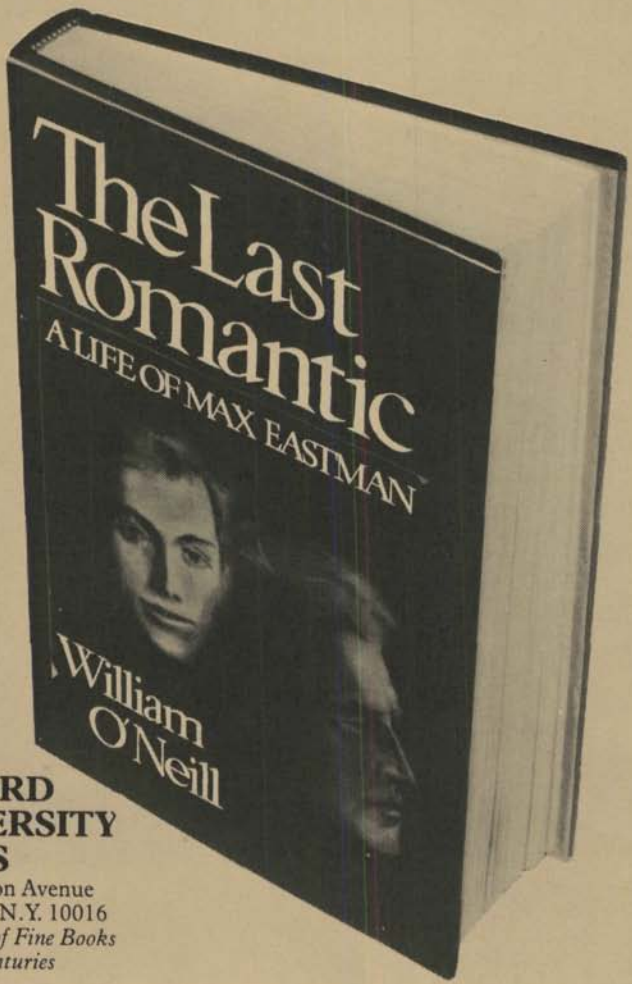

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